A Man on Crutches

by Paul Park

I had been to Los Angeles before and hated it. Whenever I had gone to visit, I had been irritated by the sweat-stained dinginess of the place, its perpetual five-o'clock shadow. I had been irritated by the lack of seasons. But two years ago when I flew out for my father's funeral, I thought something was different as soon as I got off the plane. I rolled down the window in the taxi and the air was cold and sharp. I could see the mountains. I could smell the salt. It was Saturday morning. A woman on Wiltshire Boulevard seemed amazingly good looking, amazingly well dressed.

I have a condition which recurs every few years, and you'd think I'd learn to recognize the signs. Instead I'm always taken by surprise. The problem is the condition starts with a feeling of optimism and hope, so I don't mind. That morning in the cab, I was in a good mood. I was in a mood to be forgiving, to consider for the first time that my father might have been looking for something when he moved out here. Always I had thought about him running away, pushed instead of pulled. People had always said there was more work for him out here. but when I was a child, "more work" seemed like a bad reason to do anything. A bad reason to leave my mother and the house that he had built. A bad reason to move a continent away and live in a polluted city where the weather never changed. I was ten years old when he left, and I believe I had no conscious resentment. Already by that time he was a stranger. I barely remember him living with us, and it's not because my memory is bad. Later, I didn't miss what I had never known. My mother never spoke of him.

I checked into my hotel. I planned to spend one night, and then take a bus up the Owens River the next morning. I was too poor to come out just for the ceremony. so I had taken a few days' vacation to go hiking. When I had spoken to my stepmother on the phone. I had found myself asking her whether I could take some of my father's ashes to bury up on Darwin Bench - a place of mystical significance to me, I implied. She seemed delighted, started to cry in fact, which embarrassed me. It's just that having organized my vacation, I thought I had to make it seem as if it were somehow part of the funeral, a cathartic and necessary experience, perhaps. In order to get time off at short notice I told my supervisor the same story, leaving her touched by the impression that my father and I had taken many trips together up into the mountains.

My life is full of such falsehoods, which doesn't make them easier to bear. In my hotel, I laid out my camping gear on the floor of my room. I replaced the bushings on my stove, and then I washed my hands. I took out my funeral clothes from the top compartment of my backpack - a gray wool suit. I put it on, knotted my tie, and stood looking at myself in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. I looked good in my suit, a fragile version of my father. In it I exhibited the only gift my father ever gave me, though even that had come diluted through my mother. I made faces in front of the mirror and rearranged my hair; always when I had come

out to visit my father I had taken trouble with my looks, suspecting in some obscure way that this would offer a reproach to him. That it would make him miss my mother, and miss me. At home I didn't care. This suit was the only suit I owned, which made wearing it a kind of ritual.

I washed my face and washed my hands again The air in my hotel room had depressed me, but when I stepped out into the street I felt more optimistic, clean in my uniform, mixing effortlessly with Californians on the sidewalk. I found myself in a neighborhood where all the streets were named after Eastern colleges; my stepmother had given me directions to the church It was a ten-minute walk. As I came around the corner of Brown Street, I slowed down. I composed my face

My stepmother was waiting in a crowd of people. She was named Barbara: younger than my father, a dark-haired woman in her fifties, a writer for a feminist newsletter, In a previous decade she had been a lawyer, and she was still active in environmental and leftist causes, all of which did not keep her from more domestic accomplishments. She was a cook, a quiltmaker. in the crowd on the church steps she stood out, sleek in a dark cape and black leather boots - clothes which, despite their evident expense, nevertheless managed to bring some echo back from 1966, when she had lived on a commune in Colorado. I walked up towards her, ignoring everybody so that I could take my place with her at the top of the hierarchy of bereavement. Tears glittered in her eyes; she reached out black-gloved hands and grasped hold of my thumbs. What was there to say? Not for me some vain condolence; I leaned down towards her, conscious of her smell - was it patchouli oil? Her almost poreless skin.

"Jack," she said. "I'm so happy you're here." She pulled me aside under the portal of the church. I shook my head. And it was lucky that my feelings were beyond words. Otherwise I might have been tempted to admit so much. I had not known, for example, that my father was a Lutheran.

"I'd like you to say something," she said. "There'll be a time when some of the people who were closest to him ... I spoke to you about it over the phone."

I remembered. I closed my eyes. "You probably brought something," she went on. "But I thought it would be nice if you could read a poem. You know that poem he used to love - |Pied Beauty.' Hopkins always was his favorite poet."

I nodded. Yet I felt cheated, too. The category of "favorite poet" was not one I was aware had existed in my father's mind. Did this mean there might be other poets also, only slightly below Hopkins in his estimation? Who were they? Sappho? John Ashbery? Alexander Pope?

"I'd like that," I said.

"I'm so glad you could come," she said again.

Half an hour later I found myself at the pulpit reading a poem. Sometimes my

voice cracked with emotion - a reflex. Between the stanzas I looked out over the pews. There was a big crowd. My father had produced industrial films. Mostly he had worked as a consultant, and I guess he knew a lot of people. I guess he had a lot of friends. I stared out at them.

Later, I thought about what I saw from that pulpit. It is disjointed in my memory by the stanzas of the poem, and therefore it exists in my mind not as a continuum, but as a series of independent images. I used to examine them, searching for a clue. My father was a prominent man. There had been an obituary in the Los Angeles Times. Surely Jean-Jacques would have had a chance to see it, even if he hadn't called my father's office in the days after his death. How could he have kept away? And so I used to examine those images in the church, over and over again as if they were a series of photographs - the faces, the sad bodies, the rows of pews. Surely he is there somewhere. For a while, when I was at my most compulsive, I did remember a figure lurking at the back. Now I don't. Somebody once showed me how, in different editions of a history textbook, the same photograph would appear, but changed somewhat, retouched somewhat, to illustrate some subtle new idea. In a crowd of men. skins would darken, and then grow white again. Hair would grow longer, and then short again. Women would appear, then disappear. Memory is like history. At one time it was imperative for me to see the figure of a man, hiding in the back behind a white column. Handsome in his suit. Sometimes I could even see his crutch. Memory is like history it absorbs the needs of the present. Now he's vanished.

After the ceremony I went to a reception at my stepmother's house, and I talked to some of my father's friends. Once I was back in the kitchen, looking for more ice, and Barbara was there, fussing with some strawberry tarts. "Jack," she said, "can you do something for me?"

She looked toward the window and then back. "I was at your father's office yesterday, clearing some stuff out. Eddy - that's his partner - says he's got copies of everything and the rest can go. But I feel bad about asking Elaine or someone to throw it all away, without a family member at least looking through it. It's all old files." She looked at me and blinked, but I said nothing.

"I don't have to explain, do I?" she went on. "It tires me out. Your father was a wonderful man. I know it's been hard for you sometimes, but you should understand - he really loved you."

"I know that," I said.

Then she was crying, and I went and put my arms around her. She was staring hard at one of the buttons of my shirt, inches from her eye. She balled up her fist and placed it carefully in the center of my chest. "It's business stuff," she said, after a pause. "The furniture's all rented. Just make sure I didn't miss anything personal. I put everything in a box as you go in."

My father had died suddenly, of a heart attack. My stepmother had been taking a bath, and had heard him crying out. I pictured her naked, wet, shivering, her arms around his glossy head.

In her house there were no photographs of him. I had walked around during the reception, trying to find one. Barbara had had her picture taken with the Berrigan brothers, people like that. But nothing with my father; in his office that evening, I picked a framed photograph out of the box by the door.

He shared space with some lawyer friends in a one-story professional building, not far from his house. I sat down at his desk with the photograph in my hands. It showed Barbara and him together. She was wearing a low-waisted dress. Her braid hung down her back. She turned toward him, smiling.

He, by contrast, looked raffish and unkempt. He stared towards the camera with a puzzled expression on his face. His black hair was uncombed. He wore an Irish sweater and his big chest bulged importantly.

I propped the photograph on his blotter and sat looking at it for a little while. Why was his hair still so black? Perhaps it was one of the things that had united him to Barbara - the fact that both of them had retained their natural hair color long after most people, my mother for example, had turned gray. I remembered searching his medicine cabinet for hair dye when I was about sixteen. I had found nothing.

It was cold in his office. I got up and pulled out a few drawers of his file cabinets, not knowing what to do. Everything was neatly labeled - copies of storyboards, records of old jobs.

Elaine, my father's assistant, had showed me the dumpster in the parking lot when she had dropped me off. I started loading the files into some trash bags, which were already half full. At first I was conscientious, glancing through each folder. It started to get dark outside, and I turned on the light.

I threw out everything from one cabinet, but the bottom drawer was locked. My father had hired Elaine only two weeks before he died; she had given me his keys, but she didn't know what locks they fit. I picked through the ring and then sat down again.

Now I can say I knew it, I knew it, I knew I had found something. And maybe Barbara, testing that drawer, had felt the same thing. Maybe that was why she'd gone away, unable to proceed. Memories of feelings are so colored by the lights thrown back on them; here, now, I can be sure I knew. I searched for the key for almost an hour. The window to the parking lot was completely dark when I found it, hanging from a nail in the closet, high up above the door frame. I knew as soon as I touched it what it was.

Almost I was afraid of finding something trivial. So at first I leafed impatiently through the models' head shots in the first part of the drawer. There was nothing

distinctive about them except for the neatness with which they were arranged - Male/Blonde, Female/Blonde, Male/Dark, Female/Dark - each category in a separate hanging folder.

But the drawer slid out and out. There were short stories in manuscript, creased in thirds, as if they had been sent through the mail. I thumbed through them, looking for the seamy parts - one was full of hard homosexual imagery. It was a story about a father chastising his young son.

I found a manilla envelope containing pages and pages of small notations, all in my father's printing. "F.H., 11/2/79, 1 pm? #3 only" - the dates went back fifteen years. More photographs in another envelope, snapshots this time. All women, all ages, some naked, most not. I recognized some people from the funeral, also Elaine. She was standing in the woods, a red sweater tied around her waist.

The final two folders in the drawer contained letters from a single correspondent, and what looked liked copies of my father's replies. At first I was excited, and repulsed also to find myself in such company - the first file was labeled "Letters: Jack." There were hundreds of them, and it took me a while to decide that they were not from me.

My fathers' contained no salutation or signature, just a solid block of text, often without paragraphs. The other man sometimes wrote by hand; the first letters were in a childish script, and they were difficult to read. Difficult even to glance at - I leafed forward to the spring of 1982, when he started using a typewriter. He said, "Dear Jerry," which had been my father's nickname. Once: "Dear Father." Once: "Dear Dad." One was signed, "Your loving son." "Your loving son, Jack."

This was a game they'd played, perhaps in place of sex - a make-believe father, a make-believe son. "Dear Dad," one letter read. "I'm happy to have got the chance to see you when you were in town. I'm still excited from your visit, and I don't have so much to say, only that I'm glad you had a chance to see the apartment, and see I was not being so extravagant. I know you will always think I spend my money on expensive things, so I'm glad you could be with me and share my life, if only for one night. Next time you should stay for longer. Dinner was delicious. I haven't had a meal like that since the semester started."

The box by the door included an unopened phone bill; I had seen it as I came in. My stepmother had put it there, intending, I suppose, to pay it later. I retrieved it now and cut it open - pages of long-distance calls, many to a single number in Oakland. My father had accepted collect calls from the same phone, sometimes twice a day.

I sat back in my father's chair. And this is the part I don't remember well - I sat there a long time. I'd like to think that I was shocked, disgusted, hurt, but I don't think it's true. Only I was looking at my father's phone, imagining his hand on the receiver, his lips so close to it - how many times? Nothing remained of any words

that he had said. There was no mark on the plastic - I don't remember dialing the number, but then I was letting it ring until an answering machine picked up. "This is 964-3187," it said. "If you'd like to leave a message for Jean-Jacques Brauner, please do so after the beep."

I hung up and continued reading. The last folder was labeled, "Letters: Jack (II)." And then, as if an after-thought, "My only son" - the words printed just like that in my father's intolerably precise hand.

"I'm sorry," Jacques wrote in 1987. "I know how angry you are. But I just wish you'd say it instead of brooding. If I was there you could just show me and get it over with, but I'm not, so you'll just have to ...."

To which my father had answered: "I think you're making a mistake. Eric is your boss; he's the one that you should worry about. Joanne's not in a position to harm you, so her opinion doesn't matter. I know you always want to accommodate everyone, but it's a trait that gets less charming as you age. You may pretend you're trying to be nice, but really, it's a form of insecurity and self-hate. I'm telling you this because I know ...."

When my father was dying, when he was actually dying in my stepmother's arms, was this the image in his mind? Me with this file of letters, sifting in his chair? Or Barbara? "I'm sorry to hear about Barbara's operation," Jacques wrote in 1989. "It must be very depressing to her. No matter how much you try to convince yourself that these things aren't important, it alters the way you think of yourself, like wrinkles, or losing your hair, though of course much worse. It's funny, it feels like I know her very well, enough to reassure you that I know she'll be all right, and that you're worrying about nothing ...."

I dialed the Oakland number again. The man's voice was pleasant, his intonation slightly strange, not quite American, perhaps. After the beep I said, "Listen, this is Jack Modine. I don't know how to say this, and maybe you already know, but my father had a heart attack on Thursday morning. I just wanted to tell you, and to ask you please not to send any more letters, because I don't want them forwarded to my stepmother. As I say, it was very sudden, and he wasn't in any pain."

I paused for a moment - it seemed so strange. I also have a tendency to accommodate, not that my father had ever remarked on it. "Don't worry about anything," I said. "I'm telling you because I guess you cared about him. If you want to know more, I'll be home after the fifteenth. My number is ...," I said, and I gave him the number of my apartment in Meridan.

I called him again a few weeks later and then a few times after that. I never got the answering machine again, and I never said anything either. I would just listen to him go, "Hello? Hello?" and then he would hang up. After a while he disconnected his phone. But I can remember at least one time, when I was at the height of my

craziness, I suppose - I led his number just to listen to the recorded message from the phone company.

I look back on that from a life which is, if not happy, at least regular, at least full of a routine. And it contains, I feel sure, some of the ingredients of happiness. Now I am able to isolate them - friends. Sex. Work. I have hopes that someday I will learn to mix them in correct proportions. But I was desperate then, and part of the reason was that everything I had discovered about my father seemed unreal so quickly. I threw it all into the dumpster. The unknown, beating heart of my father's life - I threw it in the garbage. I didn't even read most of the letters. Late that same night I got up from the bed in my hotel and got dressed. I had some idea of finding the bus station and waiting there until morning, but instead I walked around the streets of Santa Monica, trying to retrace the way back to my father's off ice. I wanted to look over his letters again. I wanted to go through them and read over where he mentioned me - I remembered once I went out to visit him and Barbara. He came down into the kitchen at three o'clock in the morning to find me watching TV, and he took me to an all-night hamburger stand somewhere. "The best egg creams in California," he said. Surely, I thought, he would have told Jacques about that. I remembered the date, or at least the year.

I didn't find the off ice again. The vial of ashes Barbara gave me - I threw it away too. By the time I got back to Meridan that phone number in Oakland was the only thing left, and when I found out it had been disconnected, I felt as if some essential link had been destroyed. A link to urgent knowledge - now it seems obvious. Now it seems easy to say where my trouble really started. In the absence of facts, in the absence of anything to hold on to, I began to imagine a whole world.

And the moving spirit of that world was Jean-Jacques Brauner. From the beginning, of course, I had been thinking about him, trying to make a picture of him in my mind. Or rather, not trying - the picture came by itself, and I found myself looking at it, hour after hour. It was so clear, I began to think it must be founded on something, some snap-shot in my father's file that I couldn't quite remember. It took me a long time to realize that the model for the picture was myself. I am five-eleven. Jean-Jacques was six feet. I am handsome. Jean Jacques was beautiful. Men and women turned to look at him when he walked past.

The foreign name, the hint of foreignness in the voice on the tape, I thought, must be an affectation, the residue from a privileged childhood spent abroad - he didn't really need the money that my father had been sending him. Where had he gone to college? Some expensive school, Berkeley, perhaps. No doubt he had graduated near the top of his class. No doubt he had won prizes, cash prizes which gave him the time and the prestige to pick and choose among employers. Whereas I had gone to the University of Connecticut and my mother had paid. A second-rate B.A. with third-rate grades - it was hard for me to find anything. I had a job in a health club for six dollars an hour.

This sounds carping and resentful, but in fact I did not envy his success. He

was too far away. In the morning I would watch the weather channel, and it never rained in Oakland. The temperature was always fifty-seven degrees. I had never been there, but in my mind's eye I pictured it, conveniently located atop the San Andreas Fault, midway between Yosemite National Park and the stupefying beauty of Big Sur. The capital of a new and perfect California, where fathers loved their sons and chastised them lovingly. Where college graduates found interesting, high-paying jobs. How could I begrudge Jacques anything? He was my counterpart, my double in that uncorrupted world.

And yet there must have been some conduit between that world and this, because from time to time I would catch sight of him. Not at first. At first all I noticed was a tension in the air, a sudden electricity. At certain moments in the street in Meridan, during my lunch hour perhaps, I would feel a new small sensitivity. I would know Jean-Jacques was thinking about me, that our thoughts were colliding like cold and hot fronts over Kansas. Colliding but not mixing - frustrated, later, by our lack of communication, I began to imagine that he was leaving me clues. Arrangements of sticks, of trash, junk mail, graffiti on the street, all seemed like messages in a language I could not decode.

But I'm going too fast. These delusions came gradually. And always there was part of me that was still rational. I remember talking to Servando, who was an aerobics instructor at the health club where I worked before I was let go. I told him a suspicion I had that my father was still alive, that he had faked his death, faked his cremation, fooled his wife and all his creditors, and was living in the Bay Area. It was just a theory. I had not come to any definite conclusion, and I was weighing the evidence with Servando, and listening to him carefully when he said it was unlikely, that it probably wasn't true. I believed him. I was reassured. But then I got to thinking about it later in the week, and it occurred to me that maybe Servando wasn't necessarily disinterested, that maybe he had received a letter from Jean-Jacques, or maybe some message in one of the arrangements of objects that I was finding so difficult to interpret. It drove me crazy, the idea that everything around me was so pregnant with information that might change my life, and yet I couldn't understand any of it.

That summer I decided to take the LSAT's. I had been fired from my job after an argument with the desk manager. I think I was probably in the wrong. Maybe I even told her that - in any case, she didn't hold a grudge. She arranged for me to receive. unemployment. At the same time I got a letter from my father's lawyer, saying that I had been left a legacy of $15,000. The lawyer's name was Mr. Ordauer; he also said that my father's estate would defray the expense of any further education - it was a nice letter, and I liked the language, the formal phrases. It made me want to follow in Mr. Ordauer's footsteps. I knew being a lawyer was a good job, perhaps a better job than anything Jean-Jacques had yet achieved. I called Mr. Ordauer on the phone. "Listen," I said, "was there another legacy? Did my father leave anything to a man named Brauner, in Oakland?" Mr. Ordauer had a pleasant voice. "No," he said without hesitating. "He left no money to his business

associates.”

How wonderful a gift, I thought, to be able to lie so effortlessly! So I signed up to take the LSAT’s at the University of Connecticut, and I bought some training books. And when I was studying them I realized that this was definitely what I was intended to do with my life - I knew every answer to every question in the sample tests without any problem at all. Those questions about the couples square-dancing, and who’s next to whom. I just knew it; I could see them spinning around, coming to rest.

As I say, I had never wished Jean-Jacques any harm. But I could tell now that he was worried, anxious, jealous of me. Jealous of my closeness with my father, who would be sending me to law school - I guess he decided he had to come back East and do something, because it was about that time, the third week in July, that I first saw him. As I say, I had some idea that he had been at my father’s funeral, but I couldn’t be sure. He was lurking behind a pillar. I hadn’t seen his face. The first time I saw it, I was walking down Orange Street in New Haven, and there was a beautiful dark-haired man in front of me. His right leg was bandaged, and he was swinging himself along on crutches. He turned back to look at me.

I had gone to New Haven to visit an old friend. He had seemed concerned and upset that I was sleeping so badly; the conversation was disagreeable, and so I left.

I was walking back to where I’d parked my car when I saw this man, and even then I didn’t think much about it. I just noticed his beauty, his dark eyebrows and his dark eyes. His fat soft mouth. But it wasn’t until I saw the same man in Meridan, looking at me from across the street, that I knew who it was. Almost I went up to him. Almost I confronted him. He smiled at me and made a minute gesture with his hand. I thought, I won’t play into his game. It’s not just out of chance that he allowed me to see him. He wants something from me.

I turned around and walked away from him. But I could feel his eyes. And I could feel his presence around me, the next day and the next. During the weeks before the test, I was tormented by a series of absurd accidents. Once, an egg fell on the sidewalk just in front of me. Once, a dog barked all night, just when I was finally able to rest. I’m not saying that even at the time I held him responsible for these events. I can’t picture him limping along the rooftops, an egg in his hand. I can’t picture him dragging a dog to sit outside my room, inciting it to bark. It’s just that I could feel myself deflected and distracted by bad luck, just when it was most important for me to concentrate. To rest, to gather my resources, but always, every day there was something. My landlord raised my rent. I twisted my foot, stepping off the curb in front of my apartment. I sat down, holding my leg, tears in my eyes, and I could feel that sudden tension in the air. And though I couldn’t see him anywhere in the street, especially not through eyes blurred by tears, I could feel his presence. Not that I blamed him - it had been my own stupidity, my own clumsiness. But in a way that made it worse - he was using my own worst flaws against me. He was making it impossible for me to hate anyone but myself.

But still, I refused to let myself be deflected. I studied the training books over and over. I memorized the responses. I could feel the tension growing all around me; on the morning of the test, I was very nervous. I got into my car. And I had had trouble driving for a few days - there was something wrong with my spacial perception, and I was always afraid that I was getting too close to things. Streets I had driven down a thousand times seemed narrow, and I was concerned that I might scrape the paint off cars parked along the curb. So I drove slowly, carefully, anxious when cars approached me in the opposite direction. Anxious when people passed me, or honked at me from behind.

That morning I had dressed in my suit. I was taking time with everything. I had given myself fifty minutes for the drive, but when I looked at my watch, I saw I had to hurry. I was out in the country by that time, driving past a golf course. It was separated from the highway by a guard rail and a steep embankment. There was a strip where you could pull over. And when I looked at my watch, I had to take my eyes off the road for a moment - I admit it. It's not as if he ran in front of the car; he was just standing with his crutches in the breakdown lane when I hit him.

I pulled over as quickly as I could and then just waited for a while. I left the car running, because I was still in a hurry. More than ever, in fact. An hour later I would blame myself by thinking that even in this matter of life and death I could be cursory and careless, just like the other cars that were rushing past me without stopping. But when I got out and looked at the bumper, there was no mark. I walked back down the strip, trying to find him, and I couldn't.

Yet I had seen him clearly, standing with his crutches. His dark hair, dark eyes. I had felt the shudder in the car as he slid off the front bumper.

But I didn't know what to do. I was already late. And it was possible that I had been mistaken. As I thought about it more, standing in the hot morning by the side of the road, it seemed more likely - what would he have been doing here? How had he gotten here? How could he have known that I would come this way? it was absurd. I went back to my car and drove to the test site without stopping. I was prepared - I had my pencils and my clock. I went in and we sat in rows, and I listened impatiently to the instructions. We were in the basement of Monteith Hall, and it was well lit down there. They passed out the test booklets, and then we started. The first section was analogies - it was harder than the sample I had practiced with, and I could feel myself making a few errors. But that did nothing to shake my confidence. It would have been silly to expect to perform perfectly, especially after such a disturbing incident in the car. But I felt confident that I was able to distinguish subtle shades of meaning, even though it was hot in Montelth Hall that morning. I finished the section exactly on time.

But after a while I found it harder to concentrate, because I was thinking about Jean-Jacques. What if he was still there by the side of the road, and I hadn't seen him for some reason? Maybe I had dragged him underneath my car. Or maybe he had rolled down the embankment, or been thrown over the guard rail. I had been

going almost forty miles an hour.

This was in the middle of the quantitative section. Ordinarily, it would have been so easy for me, except I couldn't concentrate. It was all pie charts and parabolas - basic stuff, but I was wondering if I could be arrested for leaving the scene of an accident. I wondered whether I'd been seen. So that when they told us to stop, I wasn't finished. And that was my best section - the next one was analytical, and the second question was about some traffic accident. I couldn't believe it. I just stared at the question.

After ten minutes, I closed my booklet. I left the pencils but I took the clock and walked out, back to my car. There was no mark on it anywhere, but even so I got in and drove back to the golf course. I thought maybe he had rolled down into some bushes near the road, or maybe he had been injured, and had managed to drag himself away into the trees. There was a copse of trees near the ninth green; I parked my car near the guard rail and climbed down the embankment. I thought maybe I would find his crutch. I poked a stick into a bush, looking for his crutches, and then I walked across the green and through the copse. I sat down on a bench on the other side, and I watched some people set up their tees. A man in a red shirt and beige pants hit a long, straight ball over the water hazard.

As I sat there, it occurred to me that Jean-Jacques had tricked me. And maybe he hadn't even been there, maybe he had never left California, but even so he had tricked me, and robbed me again. It occurred to me that he had stolen my life from me as he had stolen my father's love. That he had stolen my life, that he was living it and enjoying it, while I was sitting on this bench. I was sitting alone on the white bench, watching the man in the beige pants trudge down the hill. It was a hot, bright morning.

After a while, I got up to follow him. And I thought, it's something just to be able to get up and walk. It's something just to climb up an embankment and sit in the front seat of your car. I sat there with my hands gripping the steering wheel. I closed my eyes, and for a blissful moment I couldn't remember why I was so upset. I saw myself sitting in my father's office in Santa Monica. The fluorescent lighting overhead. The dark window and the parking lot. But this time it was different. This time a single hour had been excised from my memory, cleansing what had gone before, cleansing for a blissful moment what came afterward. Suddenly I couldn't remember whether the file cabinet had five drawers or only four. Or else the bottom drawer was locked, and I tried, and tried, and failed to pull it open.

Simultaneously, perhaps in order to replage that excised hour, I remembered something new. I slid forward on the car seat. I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and retrieved from it a letter, written years before and never sent. I unfolded it carefully, for it was worn along the creases. "Dear Dad," it said. And then in part: "I hate you. I hate you for every bad choice I ever made."

People talk so carelessly about how life gets better, about time and patience,

about bravery and strength. Be brave, they say, be strong. People connect the two. But in the real world they are opposites. They never go together. Strong people are like tank commanders driving through a field of bones. No courage is involved. Courage is the virtue of the weak.

After a while, I buckled on my seat belt. I turned on the ignition and drove home. I went indoors and lay down on my bed. All that time when I was growing up, before my father moved to California - there was no reason to remember what he did, or what he didn't do. Only later, in my mother's kitchen. Once she said: "He did the best he could. He just wasn't cut out for it. He didn't have the instinct to protect." Once she said, with no lightness whatever in her tone: "You used to bring out the worst in him."

Shortly after his death, Barbara had sent me a package containing a roll of super-8 film. They were home movies taken at my mother's house. I didn't have access to a projector; all I could do was hold them to the light. Now I took the roll from my bedside table and untaped the end. I sat up on my bed and held a strip of film up to the window. It showed a man about my age, sitting cross-legged in the grass, holding up a baby.

I pulled six or eight feet of film down between my thumbs. The image didn't seem to change.