MATTHEW JAMES BABCOCK

My Nazi Dagger

Under a sloppy gray sky, we slip down the long curves of University Boulevard toward Highway 20 in our old Dodge Caravan, jamming to Queen. Sprinkler pipes on big knobby tires arc across furrows of snowy stubble. In a trampled corral, one brown cow sits in a herd of black cows like a tarnished penny in mud. Toy-sized trucks on invisible guiderails speed across the overpass between Spring Hill Suites and the Chevron station, and in the distance, the Menan Buttes, two stumps of volcanic tuff, wear glittering necklaces of luxury homes. The heater roars, blasting through a Scentportable clip-on air freshener my wife bought in Las Vegas, flooding the cabin with the aroma of synthetic cinnamon.

"Oo, this is a good one," I say, tapping the wheel. "Check it out."

My fourteen-year old daughter, Shayla, rides in the passenger seat. For the last year, I have imagined her on a slow-motion, hormone-powered Ferris wheel, one that she boarded as a girl but that now, with each rotation, causes her breasts to swell. Already, she's a stunning redhead, freckle-dusted, teeth manacled in braces, a gifted pianist known to master Bach and Coldplay in an afternoon. She wears what she always wears: rose-patterned long-sleeved top, indigo jeans with spangly embroidery on the back pockets, mouse-brown ballet flats, no socks. She flips down the sun visor mirror and checks her mascara. She flips it up and sits back, leans forward, flips it down and stares. Mouth agape, she ogles her reflection. With her thumb, she fluffs each eyelash, coaxing the black curls into springy alignment. She doesn't fix her lashes, just brushes the tips, delicately, as if the featherweight contact is pleasure enough. From her palm, she produces an open safety pin—a new tool,

usually she uses an earring tine—and combs it between her lashes, preening out flaws.

Avery, Shayla's nine-year old sister, curls in the back seat, safe from puberty in her jeans, rubber-toed tennis shoes, pillowy crème sweater, and green-and-white striped scarf. I smile at her in the rear-view mirror, and she grins, showcasing every tooth that hasn't been knocked out by a fairy hockey puck.

We are heading to Idaho Falls for Shayla's weekly neurofeedback treatment. Normally, my wife drives, but on this Saturday she let me chauffeur.

Shayla and I aren't speaking. I imagine her cortical theta waves (now in the "mid-twenties" as opposed to the "high twenties," whatever that means) pulsing like a rubbery hairnet of purple lasers over the zone of her brain that controls, and occasionally short-circuits, her task-switching ability. I am waiting for the right moment to tell her a dagger that belonged to one of Hitler's brownshirt thugs rides in my shoulder bag behind my seat.

"Yuck," Shayla says.

She jabs the radio console with her finger. "You're My Best Friend" fizzles. She taps the selector, and from 100.7 FM comes a barrage of monster noise that throttles the dashboard speakers. The music sounds like crack cocaine throbbing through a heartbeat while violins castrate cats on electrified torture racks.

"Who's this group?" I say.

Shayla shrugs and rolls smoky eyes to heaven. "Somebody?" she says.

We coast past Burger King and the Chevron station. People in puffy coats hop over oily puddles and chat at the pumps. U-haul trucks and scissor lifts crowd A1 Dome Rental. On the onramp, I get an idea: use the music to start a conversation. Merging with traffic—a blue Kenworth hauling cable from Montana, a black VW beetle candied in pink "Hot Rod" flames—I listen to the radio's orgy of punch-drunk psychobabble. After a minute of studying the music, all I can divine is that the featured artist's top two priorities are 1) swapping sex partners like Pokémon cards, and 2) getting "out on the dance floh."

"How's choir?" I ask. "Mr. French, your teacher. Is he chilling out?"

Shayla crinkles her eyes as if a rump roast burned in the car. She shoos away my intrusion with a backhand wave, morphing me from average dad to peasant who dared address the queen. She is Cher, and I am some schmuck named Nicolas Coppola.

When I was a kid, my parents told stories in the car. This carpet bag of lore became proof that my life has substance, that the lens of the past sharpens the perspective of the present. Example: I still can't believe my dad wasn't allowed in

the room when my mom gave birth to me. The way my dad tells it, a "big blond surf bum" named Dr. Bull ambled up to him at St. Luke's, and said, "You Babcock? You got a son." Many tiny, tenacious legends remain from those free-love days of 1969 in San Francisco's Mission District—the snug apartment my parents lived in at 1070 Church Street, how they took turns sitting on the one chair they owned. Most of the stories convey the same moral: "Poverty is a blessing." One of my favorites is the day the staffers dashed through San Francisco General, where my dad was a resident, announcing that hooligans had jacked the cars in the parking lot, and how my dad looked out the window and saw, in the glossy ranks of stripped Lotuses and Jaguars, his dinky stone-blue VW Bug—battered, homely, but completely unmolested.

These are the stories I want to tell Shayla. I want our storytelling to pack the portmanteau of family narrative so full we can't close it, even if we sit on it. Storytelling might be the closest we come to immortality. When the next generation snubs the tradition, it's a death in the family.

When I was twelve, my dad took me back to San Francisco. I can't remember why—to rehash the past, get the story straight. I went haywire in the plane as we swooped down to the runway because I thought we were going to splash into the bay. In our hotel, I gazed out the window, astonished at the melee of Asian kids at recess and the military attack speed of their four-square games on their rooftop playground. Out the other window, ranks of T'ai chi practitioners swayed in sync with their ghost master's strange underwater choreography. For dinner, we ate at Yamato Japanese Restaurant then rode the cable cars. When we jumped on our car, my dad flipped the attendant a quarter. The guy raised the coin and laughed.

"Hey, this guy's a nickel-loaner!" he called in a Hispanic accent.

My dad, unaware that inflation had tapped The Golden City in our decade-long absence, said, "Oh, has it gone up?" and gave the guy a few bucks.

Stories keep us from getting lost on our way to tomorrow. They keep us current on the price of today.

We speed past Rigby, birthplace of television. Along rivers and around barns, cottonwoods are snarled in bunches, shattered and leafless and gray. In front of Attic Annie's Antiques, a heavy-shouldered woman, presumably Annie, spears a teardrop "Open!" banner in a steel base. Shayla gapes in the visor mirror, pinches her eyelashes, texts someone on her hot pink cell phone. I turn the radio down; she turns it up higher than it was. She sighs, unclicks her seatbelt, smoothes her blouse over her waist, squirms and tugs at her clothes, then clicks her seatbelt back in.

I want to tell Shayla so many things, but I know how much she loves to deliver the cool rebuff, so instead I let the world flash by. I see rodeo stands, camper shells

dumped on the ground. From a park, a tank camouflaged in young aspens shells us with the blanks of the history. The drum track on the stereo throws body blows. Keyboards shriek like chickens being pulled apart. Outside, a hand-painted black and white cow is a mailbox. A Bobcat skid-steer loader waits behind a damaged warehouse, a plastic bag hooked like a deflated ornament on its bucket. Over a chain of black tanker cars, a billboard for the *Bodies* display floats a skinless Chinese man across insulated sky. We rush under the flayed man's gaze, his expression somewhere between shock and admiration.

Because I can't talk to anyone, I wonder to myself: Are noise and stories the new enemies? In our adolescent twenty-first century is the battle for world supremacy between talking (an absorbing exchange) and talk (rhymes with squawk)? What makes us want to wrap the pandemic of techno-blather—radios, cell phones, computers, texting—around us like addicts at a shelter? What do we gain, insulated from our stories, quivering in comfy blankets of digital chaos, vegetating in the narcotic, narcoleptic buzz? "Sad is the man," Li-Young Lee writes, who "is asked for a story / and can't come up with one." Noise is the placebo, the pleasure drug that soothes a global tribe of tale-less orphans chasing the fugitive myth.

Like tiny charges, stories I could tell Shayla pop into my head, each a little biplane towing an aerial banner over a county fair's week-long tribute to spare time. "Epic Beginnings": my dad, a "Cam Pounders of Pocatello" car club diehard with no known prospects, tinkers with his 1950 Ford in the driveway, and his father, a railroad conductor who would earn his high school diploma in his sixties, emerges from the house with an application packet for the University of Utah and says, "There's an entrance exam at the U in three days. Be there." "Pragmatic Bravado": circa 1931, and my Grandpa Dixon, who boxed amateur bouts for cash and later became a professor of physics and astronomy, can't afford a rail ticket from Logan, Utah, to Shoshone, Idaho, for the holidays so he hops a boxcar and rides spread-eagle the whole way, with danger as the price for bragging rights.

"Hey, I want to tell you something," I say.

"What?" Shayla says.

At the Hitt Road exit, we leave the highway. Past a junkyard, two oil barrels welded into bull riding trainers wait in a field for beginning buckaroos. A brown sign advertises topsoil for sale. Blackbirds rim a stop sign and bolt for the sky when our brakes squeak. More birds squirt from the ribs of the overpass. On the other side of the highway, above a storage unit, a billboard of gleeful river rafters on it tells us adventure starts in Elko, Nevada.

I reach over and turn down the radio. "I'm going to get my Nazi dagger priced," I say. "Between appointments."

"Aw!" Shayla cries, mouth open like a wounded Molly Ringwald. She cranks the radio volume back up. "I thought we were going to lunch."

"We are. Lunch then the Treasure Hunters Roadshow. At one of the hotels, close. I want to see how much it's worth."

"That's dumb," Shayla says.

"Could be worth a lot."

"Dumb."

"I'll go!" Avery calls from the back.

We shoot a straight pipeline, south, into Idaho Falls, where our van joins a pokey rhumba line of golden SUV's and unwashed auto parts trucks and flashing brake lights. Yellow signs with black letters gleam on telephone poles: *Second Chance Loans at Rebound Financing* and *Idaho's "Man" Event*. The ungodly music on the radio strains the seams in my skull. Grains of fresh rain spot the windshield. I turn on the wipers and clean them off.

We ferry through an intersection, past a steel manufacturer, a plot of burnished marble headstones. A massive Polynesian in khaki chinos strolls through the lot at Buyer's Market Auto, his ropy ponytail swinging like a Chinese queue against the back of his white Oxford shirt. We bump over a railroad crossing, and an eagle-and-American flag billboard for Teton Steel Roofing declares, "Unlike Barack, We've Got You Covered!" The chalky column of the Evans Grain silo looms to the east, sheathed in mist. Spinning windmills ride the spine of the snow-veined hills. I think of the long-lost winter when my mother and her sister, Cheryl, "waterskied" with boards strapped to their feet on the snowy verge of Pole Line Road, towed by my Grandpa Dixon in his two-tone Bel Aire.

"You know the biggest consumer of black hip-hop music is white suburban teenagers?" I say.

Shayla stops slicing the pin through her lashes. "Why?"

"What do you think?"

For a second, her brain chugs. She looks down for the answer. Then, caught engaging me in conversation, she turns away. Her lids grow maroon hoods of eye shadow, and she returns to pin-grooming her lashes, a starlet interrupted by a hack reporter. I sigh and steer around potholes, hoping she won't stab herself in the eye.

* * *

My Nazi dagger has a cherry-stained wood handle. The chipped grip is sculpted, like a Judy dress form, and bears the image of the "Iron Eagle" with swastika and oak-leaf wreath. The scabbard is chocolate enamel. Before it belonged to me, someone dropped it on its point, splitting the round nub on the chape. Two screws, which resemble dinky eyeballs, secure the chape to the scabbard, which gives it the appearance of a myopic aardvark grinning out of the side of his snout.

The circled "SA" image in the pommel (*Sturmabteilung*, stormtroopers) has faded to the color of dull brass. The SA symbol is a cultish mix of lightning snakes, the anarchy A, and the Masonic compass. The hanger and clip, as well as the forte section of the blade below the nickel-plated hilt, bear the circled "RZM" stamp for *Reichszeugmeister* (national material master). The RZM mark "M7/67/41" means Gottlieb-Hammesfahr made the blade in Solingen in 1941. The hanger's code, "L2/60/41," identifies it as leather goods from the same year. The zinc clip's "M5/71" and "olc" diamond stamp trace it to the firm of Overhoff & Cie in Lüdenscheid, a town whose patron saint, Medardus, as a boy, was shielded from the rain by a hovering eagle.

My Nazi dagger was made by people named God-Love.

My Nazi dagger belonged to my grandfather. He brought it home from the war. When he died, my parents showed up at my house, gave it to me, and called it my inheritance.

* * *

When Shayla was eighteen months old, she started sucking her middle and ring fingers. She sucked them until she was nine, walking around the house with a little Ronny James Dio "metal horns" sign plugged in her face. She kept a blankie decorated with blue squiggles and pink hearts until she was the same age. In late August 2001, when she was four, she flew with us out of JFK, thrashing and screaming because she realized she'd left it in my wife's mother's car in Rochester. She howled like she was being hijacked and disemboweled. Avoiding the eyes of everyone on the plane, I bear-hugged her to my chest and looked out the window at the Twin Towers. At that moment of crisis, we rolled toward the sun, and the two buildings incandesced like pillars of bronze fire, awash in the fuel of dawn, just weeks before they flamed and fell on television.

In third grade, Shayla started staying in the bathroom for hours. She chewed her fingernails to milky nubs. She yanked out her eyelashes and eyebrows, sometimes her hair, arranging the fine strands in fascicles like someone admiring wildflowers.

Once makeup entered her life, she overhauled her mascara obsessively, weeping in the bathroom each time she started over. She shot bursts of air through her nostrils, like a whale with Tourette's clearing its blowhole. Sitting on the couch, watching television, she chewed her toenails, plying her toes apart and eyeing them ravenously like a baboon hunting for nits. For a while—it was a feat of flexibility that rivaled the contortionism of Yogi Coudoux—she gnawed the skin off the bottom of her heel.

I went from detached to enraged to destroyed. Why couldn't she stop staring in the mirror and smoothing her hair to the side of her head with her finger and get on the bus like everybody else? Why did she blow a can of hairspray per day and plaster her classy red hair into a rock-hard, sludge-brown helmet? Why did she wear the same cutoff jeans to school for weeks? What green six-legged demon had cinched a sleeper hold on her brain and started devouring it?

We consulted a brigade of specialists, most of them kind and smiling and disposed to wearing linty cardigans in cramped offices with pictures of mallards and great blue herons on the walls. The first diagnosis, obsessive-compulsive disorder, gave way to body dysmorphic disorder. We started her on Fluoxetine. Then, on a summer trip to the Fingerlakes, we talked with my wife's sister and learned her daughter was taking neurofeedback treatments for anxiety-related issues. On returning, we cast a wild net of phone calls to Wyoming and Wisconsin, and from a local radio commercial found that a Twin Falls clinic was staking a neurofeedback branch in Idaho Falls.

In December, we drove four hours to Salt Lake City, left our other kids at my parents' apartment, and took Shayla for an early-morning QEEG with Dr. Corydon Hammond at the University Hospital, a service that rocked us for nine hundred dollars. Shayla's morning makeup ritual almost made us late, and we zoomed through the translucent blue dawn beneath the shadowy peaks of the Wasatch Mountains in bumper-to-bumper traffic that swept us along like a roller coaster.

Outside Dr. Hammond's office, we read photocopied articles about how Ritalin patients and meth addicts develop similar chromosomal quirks. We crowded in Dr. Hammond's office and watched him stretch a red beanie pocked with white eyelets onto Shayla's head. While he squirted gel through the eyelets and hooked electrodes to Shayla's earlobes and fiddled with his laptop, I examined his certificates for hypnotism and sex therapy, the poofy sparrow's nest of hair on his balding head, and bookcases crammed with fat titles such as *The Marital Orgasm*.

"Relax your jaw," he told Shayla, lightly stroking her face.

Shayla sat still, eyes closed. Each time his hand brushed her eyelashes, she flinched. At one point, somebody knocked, and Dr. Hammond harumphed, got up, and labored to the door.

"See this light?" he said to the person in the hall. "That means, 'Don't knock when it's on,' okay?"

"You have garbage?" the voice asked. "I was—I couldn't—"

"I have patients," Dr. Hammond said, shutting the door. "Don't knock when it's on."

Back home, two days before one of Shayla's treatments, the local paper ran a full-page ad for the Treasure Hunters Roadshow. The show's schedule listed a stop in Idaho Falls, for one Saturday only, at the AmeriTel Inn—five minutes from our clinic. When my eyes landed on the "Military Items & Swords" section, my heart thudded. I wondered if I might have a uranium mine in my sock drawer, some bright star of hope that could rescue us from our family funk.

I called Treasure Hunters Roadshow, and a cheerful Southern woman assured me they didn't charge gate fees. She promised on-site payment for items sold, and as the day approached the amounts, I imagined banking from my dagger sale ballooned from ten thousand to fifty thousand to a quarter million. For some reason, the Bob Barker betting wheel in my head beeped to a stop on three and a half million. Mentally, I drilled myself: I wouldn't show anyone the dagger until the last minute; if they wanted to "take a look at it in the back," I'd pull the blade on them and tell them to back away. Whatever it was worth, I told myself, my daughters would enjoy being on television. It would cheer them up, help us forget our problems. In the trunk of my most secret and desperate heart, I wondered if the money from my dagger might buy Shayla a miracle.

Thoughts full of plots and price thresholds, I glance in the rearview mirror at Avery, look sideways at Shayla. The song on the radio changes. The dashboard pounds as if caging a wolverine in heat. Synthesizer notes ricochet through my skull like BB's. The squiggly sax makes me think of a sheik and bellydancer doing a jitterbug. I snap my fingers, tap the wheel.

"Catchy tune," I say.

We slog in traffic down Hitt Road, passing through the gauntlet of marts and CD exchanges and restaurants painted like Mexican cantinas, the gaudy mothership of the Edwards Cinema. An inflatable Mario fronts a pueblo-type strip mall, tapping a vein of consumer love for Native American heritage and plucky Italian plumbers.

At Sunnyside, we hook west then south on Washington Parkway, slowing down where the city evolves into archipelagos of spiffy, earth-toned offices, buildings

posing as resort spas with timber archways, all squeezed from the same tube of cookie-paste architecture: pediatrics/almond, sports medicine/oatmeal, home hospice care/nutmeg.

At the bottom of the street, sunlight lances through the clouds. Pine-raked mountains press their peaks into a quilt of colorless haze. The sign at our building, Number 3094, consists of six panels, all for consulting groups. One panel says in red letters that we can rent or lease space if we call Duane.

"Here we are," I say.

As we unload, flecks of sleet pelt our faces. A magpie hops away from the entrance as I swing the door open for my troops.

The foyer bleeds silence. Slabs of busy marble in the style of a Jackson Pollack painting top the front desk and magazine tables. The syntax on the receptionist's sign baffles me: "Away From the Desk, Ring Bell for Service."

"See ya," I say.

Used to the routine, Shayla marches down the hall. She walks stiffly, arms down, volunteering for the gas chambers. Avery sprawls on the floor and reads a book I suggested from the classic *Great Brain* series. Once she discovers the story is about boys, she snaps her book shut and starts making virtual donuts on my wife's Ipod Touch.

"How long?" she says. She swirls her thumb over the screen, hypnotized. Her face glows a mystical blue. Little bonfires blaze in her irises. "When are we going to leave?"

"Soon."

Outside, the magpie returns. It bops up to the tinted glass door, jabs its beak at its reflection then hops into flight, knifing through the blue-green Spiel Consulting pyramid and motto: "People, Progress, Passion." Seeds of rain burst on the sidewalk. In the surrounding fields, flat mounds of construction-site earth shake fur coats of flossy weeds.

I drum my fingers on my kneecap, watch Avery bake digital goodies. The waiting room colors are subdued, classic, calm—except for a jarring red and silver six-foot GOFASTWEB.COM sign on a spring-loaded roll stand. Blazing like a Nazi banner, the sign promises "loud, over-the-top, in-your-face results!" The sign clashes with the hand-finished Italian stucco walls of gravy, coffee, and guacamole. The wall behind the receptionist's desk is the color of fresh manure. On the table across the room, a spriggy bouquet of sea-green leaves and russet cranberries erupts from a stone vase. A rack of pamphlets depicts men and women in various poses of agony and asks, "Wearing Too Many Hats?" The magazines on my table show a

welder in a fluorescent hard hat, a Tongan man doing reverse sit-ups on a Roman Chair apparatus, and a Greek-looking, mushroom-nosed entrepreneur in jeans, blue blazer, and a T-shirt with a spaghetti splash of modern art on the chest.

"How long?" Avery groans.

"About an hour. Be cool."

I think of the day I sat in the bathroom for an hour, while Shayla shuddered in a ball next to the tub like a heroin user in rapid detox and in a grinding howl cried, "Nothing can help! Nothing!"

I think of the week my parents stayed with us, and during one of Shayla's more violent meltdowns I put her in our van and drove her through miles of country roads, past grain silos and potato fields, with her screaming the whole time, and how she tried to open the door and jump out.

I think of the day we were late for the airport, how she wouldn't leave the bathroom, and I had to carry her—while she kicked and yelled—into the van as the rest of our kids cried.

"You can stretch it out," a voice says from one of the consulting offices. "Or keep it the same. But there's always a price for doing either."

A couple emerges from a hallway. The man is a mountain of humanity, as big as two pro wrestlers. He wears desert camo cargo pants, an olive-drab T-shirt with a black rifle insignia over the breast. Sunglasses ride his shaved head. Bleached scraggles, like church bell ropes, dangle from his black goatee. The woman wears a navy-blue Boise State Broncos windbreaker with fleece lining. She carries her purse in both hands like a squirrel transporting a nut.

From the time he was a junior in high school, I say to them silently. *My grandfather was on his own financially.*

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The SA became known as "brownshirts" because they used cheap brown shirts left over from World War I. Over time, the SA ranks swelled to three million, threatening both Hitler's position as Über-Thug and the anti-Nazi German regular army of one hundred thousand. In 1934, assisted by the newly formed SS (*Schutzstaffel*, defense corps), Hitler arrested and executed Ernst Röhm, the SA's kingpin, as well as other key SA figures in what became known as "The Night of Long Knives." In the early days of Hitler's rise, before they were herded up and shot, the SA gathered in beer halls and with rubber truncheons cracked the skulls of anyone who heckled the future Führer.

The human skull consists of neurocranium and viscerocranium. The neurocranium cages the brain. The brain's charges strobe at different wavelengths: delta (deep sleep), theta (daydreaming and guilt-free disengagement from routine tasks), beta (arousal), mu (the "wicket rhythm"), alpha (meditation, relaxation), and gamma (observed in Tibetan Buddhist monks who dial their brains to maximum sensitivity and minimum power consumption). Russian narcologist, Dimitri Valuev, has shown that higher creativity, deeper relaxation, better data recall, and extra-sensory perception occur in brains calmed with "multidimensional music."

When my dad was young, at the time rock and roll was born, he didn't want to take piano lessons anymore, so on the way home from his lesson, he propped his piano books on the fender of a car at an intersection and waved his musical troubles goodbye as the car pulled away. When my grandfather learned fate had decreed my dad would no longer be pulling music duty at home, he went out and bought a radio.

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We eat lunch at a hopping Chick-Fil-A, scamper to the car, and bumble toward the AmeriTel Inn through a gerrymandered maze of gleaming vehicles and parking lots. Rain pulses in waves, greasing streets and speckling the windows of restaurants. A mother in rosy cotton pants and a lumpy white coat with a fur-lined hood exits a check cashing agency. She slaloms with her daughter through the log-jam of cars, head lowered, her envelope of money raised to ward off the stormy sky when it drops the price of doomsday.

At the AmeriTel, a feeble drove of clunkers clogs the parking lot. Sagging Oldsmobiles, slue-footed trucks, a scratched black '67 Eldorado. Partially unstuck X's of duct tape flap across the bubble-glass windows on the camper shell of a scabby green weekender van with dirty tangerine curtains. I pull into the only space left.

"You coming?" I say, turning off the ignition.

"I'm staying," Shayla says. "Hey! Leave it on. I need the radio."

I turn the car on. Before I can launch my lecture on wasting gas, Avery says "Let's go!" and tugs me toward the hotel.

Inside, we smile and nod at the clerk and follow the Treasure Hunters Roadshow signs down the hall. The images on the signs are identical to those in the newspaper, on the website, on the pamphlets: gobs of shimmering gold, ingots of silver, an airbrushed hodge-podge of pre-1934 paper currency.

In a conference room, we halt. All six chairs against the wall are taken. Nobody looks at us. Two long tables joined in an "L" are heaped with computers, cash boxes, ledgers, and hard drives. A man in baggy jeans and a black Treasure Hunters Roadshow golf shirt hunches over the far table, blinking at his computer and speaking in muffled tones to a heavyset couple in teal warm-ups and high tops. The couple crouches together, blocking our view of the valuables they cradle like contraband in their laps. The THR rep looks to be in his late forties or early fifties, ash-colored mustache, nicotine skin, feathered hair parted in retro *Corvette Summer* style. His soupy eyes and slack cheeks cast him as a man who has driven, chain-smoked, and not slept for a week.

"Is this right?" Avery says, looking up at me. She yanks my hand as if ringing for the maid. "Are we at the right place?'

"We are, honey," I say.

A mess of THR pamphlets sits on the near table, each bearing the same glitzy icons: platinum bars, Barber dimes, Civil War sabers. Five pamphlets have personal contact information jotted on them. I take a pamphlet and ink my data on the back: phone number, address, email.

The woman at the table near us calls herself Josie. She wears her brassy hair in a piglet ponytail stub. She sports a black THR golf shirt and pinstripe slacks and strikes me as a cross between a gabby saloon girl and a tubby Kathy Najimy.

A man sits opposite Josie, doing some fast but quiet business. The man's hair looks like a clown wig, a disguise an inept bank robber would wear. Twenty chintzy American flag pins stick like tranquilizer darts to the front of his red and white baseball cap. He mumbles and pulls plastic coin boxes from his jacket pockets with deft shyness, a street vendor showing second-rate wares, a gambler with Alzheimer's unpacking a vest of spring-loaded derringers.

"Interested in instruments?" he says, folding a piece of paper, packing his coins up. "Accordions?"

"Sure, yes!" Josie giggles. "Anything. Especially, you know, a Los Angeles trumpet?"

American-flag pin man shambles out. I drop my signed pamphlet on the pile. The people in the chairs rise and shift, and the line moves down. Avery and I sit in last two open chairs, and I recall the THR phone operator's advice: "Many of our guests experience a forty-five minute wait, so bring a book."

Josie raps happily on her laptop. She snatches a pamphlet from the pile, machine-guns data into her computer, and calls, "Next!"

A mother and twenty-something young woman and man shuffle like mental patients to the table. The young man carries a cardboard box. A denim shirt covers

the box like a magician's cloth. The young man moves cautiously, as if offering a sacred guinea pig for sacrifice. His hair looks like a dandelion ready to pop. His neck doesn't sit properly on his shoulders but juts out, crane-like. His mother's mad scientist hair confirms her genetic link to her son. She wears roomy jeans, dingy aerobic shoes and lemon-lime ankle socks. When she walks, she gyrates her body as if trying to worm her shoulders into her navy blue raincoat without tipping over. Her daughter wears a white sweatshirt with a cartoon puppy on the front. She moves one withered arm up and back, guiding herself along an invisible handrail.

"When are we going?" Avery says. She elbows me and kicks her feet. "When's it our turn?"

"After these people," I say.

"Which people?"

"These," I say, gesturing to the room.

From a hidden stereo, a song plays: "Bad Company." I glance sideways at the gang next to me. Together, we make a dandy flophouse of bandy-legged banditos, a shooting gallery for free-lance lobotomists, a motley and unshampooed paddywagon of what Marx called the *lumpenproletariat*. One man slouches in a flight jacket like a blind drifter, hands in pockets, ankles crossed. He stares through sunglasses at the floor, repeating inaudible spells. Another man and woman, immensely fat, watch their curly red-headed daughter somersault in alligator pajamas and strawberry galoshes. The fat man's white T-shirt exposes a hefty slab of his gut. His unshaven roll of face flab swings like a packsaddle under his chin. Someone burps. A used Q-tip rests between my feet.

We will star in no television spots today. We have not come to discuss glazed qingbai ceramics from the Song Dynasty with Ian McTavish, Professor of Art History at the University of Leicester, or to watch someone named Simon from Finkleheimer & Zimmerman's puff a pipe of Old Holborn and tell us our autographed Pete Rose cards are worth millions.

We are knick-knack whores pawning our organs for a crate of moonshine.

"Well!" Josie chirps. She stands and shakes hands with the zombie family. "What have you got?" The young man raises the box and announces something I can't hear.

"Well, are you gonna show 'em to me," Josie cackles, "or am I gonna have to take 'em out myself!"

* * *

In 1924, Hans Berger, using a modified galvanometer, recorded the first EEG, a zigzag that looked like a saw blade ("das Elektrenkephalogramm"). Before using silver foil electrodes and rubber bandages, he poked wires through people's scalps, even using his sixteen-year old son, Klaus, as a lab rat.

As a member of the SS, Berger worked for the Genetic Health Court, which forced the surgical sterilization of people whose brains—the upper crust insisted—ticked in different ways: Jews, mutes, the deaf, and homosexuals (a group that included Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders). In 1941, the year my Nazi dagger was forged, Berger committed suicide after a futile slugfest with depression, just as the Axis Powers were launching Operation Barbarossa into the Baltics.

I want to tell family stories to Shayla because we're losing each other to opposing sides. Looking back, I can see why history has cast me as her enemy—the mornings I ranted and booted her out of the house when she wouldn't go to school because the wind would mess up her hair; or now, the times I holler when she won't stop yanking out her eyelashes until she looks like a burn victim; or when she arises at eight on a Sunday morning—with church starting at one—and at the last second, with the rest of us piling into the van like a circus act, locks herself in her room, and yells, "I don't know what's going on!" as I flip out and bellow, "Face the world!"

The story I want to tell Shayla is the one that hasn't happened. I want to tell her there were times I wanted to use my Nazi dagger on her, then on myself, times when I wished for nothing but the purple-heart power to take my dagger and shred her tormenter to pencil shavings. Problem was, I couldn't see her attacker, couldn't name it, couldn't make a lunge at the target—because it was disembodied, a ghost assailant, a sadistic poltergeist dancing us into a dither every day. I was fighting Predator for Teens. Some day, I want to tell her how hard it was to watch her suffer. I want her to taste the cocktail of anger and fear and futility I've never really swallowed. I want to tell her the most terrifying enemy is the one you don't understand, the one that keeps hurting your babies in spite of your attempts to make it stop.

I suppose that's every dad's quest: Save The Daughters. When we do, though, why do we find ourselves on a pile of smoking limbs and bricks and shell casings, sweating and scarred and victorious, wondering how our heroism has caused all this carnage?

Shayla and I have good days. Then, from somewhere she hears the propaganda from a parade of marching bullhorns, and she looks at me as if she's served her brain on a salver to the smiling autocrat. On days like this, I feel her goose-stepping away, a strange quiet look on her face, and when I ask her where she's going, or why she

won't talk to me anymore, she turns eyes of tempered steel on me and threatens to turn me in as a traitor to the party.

* * *

Shayla sits in a white brick office, facing a laptop. I sit behind her like a rookie weapon systems manager. T. R., Shayla's technician, parts a valley in her hair and, with a Q-tip, dabs creamy goop on her scalp. He hooks electrodes to her head then kicks back and calls up a palette of quivering EEG readings on his laptop: jiggling highways of neon red and yellow, jags of purple lightning. A Styrofoam dummy head sits between the computers, red stickers like big measles dotting its skull. Grinning, T. R. jerks his thumb at his laptop.

"These are her readings, here," he says. "Oh, and here—where is it?"—he hands me a spiffy toffee-colored folder of paper secured with a long brad at the top—"we're going off this. What you guys had done in Utah."

T. R. has spiky dark blond hair, light green cat's eyes, a face like a Thunderbirds marionette. Stubble shadows his ski bum's jaw. It doesn't surprise me, when I ask, that he's done his degrees in Pocatello and Missoula. He wears a down vest over a red plaid shirt, pleated jeans, and casual brown dress shoes. The way he acts, he might be trucking oil derricks to Sinclair, not making psychedelic video games with my daughter's brain waves. He swirls a finger on his computer's mouse pad.

"If you have questions," he says, "just ask."

Shayla's laptop beeps. My body jerks. Shayla sits still, as if meditating. Her screen flickers blue then shows sixteen gray blocks. One at a time, images fill the blocks, like playing cards completing an easy puzzle—a landscape, hills burdened with black pine trees, a river churning through pink stones. Once the picture completes itself, Shayla's computer beeps. The next screen shows eight blocks, and, beep-beep, the digital cards make an elk in the wild. On the next twelve-block screen, three picture cards snap in place then stop. Shayla watches the screen, implacable, practiced, a pro. I inhale and make a fist. *What's wrong?* I think. *Why won't the next card move? Move!* A beep jolts me. I sit back, shocked at my telepathic powers. Shayla finishes the picture of an alpine sunset on her screen. I lick my lips. I'm salivating.

"What are the beeps?" I ask, flipping through the report.

T. R. points to his screen, where a violet heartbeat spazzes down one of Shayla's space-age highways, its valleys and peaks swerving outside the channel of the road.

"We're trying to get her waves in here, in a decent range. When she gets them below the level we want, she gets a beep."

"How does she change her wave levels?"

T. R. nods majestically, index finger aloft. "That," he says, "is what nobody knows."

I scan the report. It reads like a mishmash of propaganda in pidgin English, a hodge-podge of technical symbols and jargon: "phase-lag" and "Hz" and "protocol." The end of the report shows pages of color-coded maps of my daughter's head, like thermograms, as if a beatnik artist poured a hundred melted rainbows into fifty outlines of her skull. Bright green floods some of Shayla's heads, bruised with yellow, like ripening Martian fruit. On other pages, a rash of fireball juice flushes twenty of her head diagrams, pools of cherry scalded with nebulas of tangerine, cranium-shaped cauldrons of Starburst candy soup, a flip-cartoon of citrine oil spills and zesty pink fingerpaint smearing her dreams.

"See," T. R. says. He holds out a fist, tucks his thumb in his fingers. "Back here, in this area"—with his other thumb and finger he brackets part of his wrist—"this is the fight-and-flight part of the brain. Reptiles have this. A little more, and you've got mammals, cats, dogs. This here"—he pets his tucked-in thumb—"this is the fear center, and around that, protecting it, pressing on it"—he cups the demo fist in his other hand—"are the executive functions. Separates us from animals. "

Shayla's screen flips four picture cards into place and completes a puzzle of Mt. Hood in summer. Another picture: a charcoal timber wolf with maple eyes. The beeps accelerate.

"Good," T. R. says to Shayla. "You're doing great."

I close the report on the desk.

"See," T. R. says, fishing for his Iphone. "If an iguana comes at me"—he judo chops an imaginary iguana on the desk—"it'll bite me or run away. It's not going to get mad at me. But a cat, if you make a cat mad, it'll pee on your pillow. Zebras, lions. They have higher order responses, but they don't think and feel like we do."

I think: *Bulimic iguana? Schizophrenic zebra?*

"That can make things harder," I say.

"Exactly!" T. R. says, eyes bright. "We overthink things. Overstress."

"Might be better to be an iguana or a zebra," I say. "In some ways."

"Yes!" he laughs. He flips open the report. "Shayla's got the most complex reading I've seen. Like some kids, a kid with ADHD, usually has one area, and we can nail it. But Shayla's got quite the network going on."

"What about gender?" I ask. Shayla's screen shows a floating iceberg, a marbled sea-borne cathedral of eroded quartz. "Are male readings different from female?"

"The corpus callosum," T. R. says. He flips out his Iphone and shows me the screen: a rotating 3D image of a transparent brain. The image turns slowly, a clear walnut with a stretched butterfly of rosy nougat in the center. "If you pull back the halves of the brain, the hemispheres, you see the corpus callosum. Connects the halves. It's bigger in women"—he jabs a finger all over his head—"so their brains are connecting more. More parts are talking to more parts."

"Mine's smaller?"

"Yep."

"So all these years, my wife's been right."

T. R. rocks back and laughs. "Right, so we're trying to get the parts of Shayla's brain that aren't talking to each other to talk to each other."

In the foyer, I finish a survey. The Howard Miller clock on the wall chips seconds off its Roman numerals. A basketball game plays on a television in one of the offices. The survey lists a range of behaviors—aggressiveness, headaches, defiance, appetite control, compulsive thoughts—and numbers 0 ("not a problem") through 5 ("high concern").

I put the survey down. I examine the painting on the wall. It's a lousy Monet imitation, a stone bridge and shoulder-to-shoulder ranks of waterfront Dutch villas with crow-stepped gables. Orange flowers foam from window boxes into the river. Scoops of red and gold sun dimple the blue water. Without trying, I imagine myself stepping into a gondola and slipping with the current under the bridge, gliding past one of the windows. Inside one of his villas, Hitler sits in a crippled rocking chair, saluting a room of sedated iguanas and zebras, and his technician, a dapper SS busybody in round glasses and white lab coat, hooks the Reichmeister's head to a tangle of red and green wires, and the QEEG ticking across the report that history will never read is making a wave of—what? little swastikas?

* * *

If Hitler was the brain, was the SA the body? Should we think of body and brain as separate, hilt and blade, one dominant over the other? Or is that the moment of death?

When Shayla was nine, my wife and I found her in her bed, mummified in her sheets. She was crying. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, "I think I'm fat!"

For years, my Nazi dagger stayed in a drawer with my clothes. Then I cached it in some CD's, in a gray fiberglass crate from the Falconhurst Dairy in Buhl, where

Perry Smith, one of the killers in Capote's *In Cold Blood*, gets temporary work as a truck driver.

Now, my Nazi dagger is my traveling companion, my *vade mecum*. I take it everywhere, with all my priceless fears and cheap mythologies and other weapons of choice.

* * *

Josie peels the sacramental denim shirt from the cardboard box and peeks inside. All three members of the sloth family turn their frizzy heads and look at her. The stereo plays "25 or 6 to 4."

"*Wolverine*, yeah, nope," she says. She lifts a comic book from the box, a trout too small to keep. "This year they started mass producing. I could give you twenty bucks for the whole box, but—."

The recluse family confers, shakes heads.

"No?" Josie chimes. "Okay, thanks for coming in."

The THR man at the other table—whom I've finally pegged as a younger Richard Farnsworth, especially from *The Grey Fox* days—has begun to service customers, so the chairs are emptying, and Avery and I are bumping down the line. Avery grins and shakes her fists.

"I'm so excited!" she says. "What if it's a million?"

"What if it's two million?" I say.

"Then I could have one and you could have one!"

The jacket-and-sunglasses drifter bargains with Josie. Like a blackjack dealer, he fans a range of plastic coin boxes across the table. Each box contains a bed of blue foam, cut to fit its coin. He speaks too low for anyone to hear and moves the boxes with his finger, like a man sliding checkers around a board. Josie returns his no-nonsense savoir-faire. She nods, chin in hand, looks him in the eye.

"You feeling a hundred?" she says. "That's what I'm feeling. A hundred."

She riffs digits into her laptop, prints the man a check, and snaps photos of the coins. As the drifter shoulders through the exit, an unshaven man in floppy sweat pants, Hard Rock Café jacket, and Big Bird cap walks in. He sets a gallon jar of gasoline-colored liquid on a cooler. Josie spins, sees him, and claps her hands.

"You've brought me some hootch!" she cackles.

The droopy THR guy joins Josie, unlocks a cash box at her elbow, and dumps money and valuables inside.

"Got yourself some sweet tea?" he says.

"You could call it that," she laughs. "I'm gonna be one happy drunk girl tonight!" The room rumbles with understanding laughter.

I check my watch. Avery bounces her knees. I count chairs and remaining people and guess we'll be next at Josie's nook. I look through the steamy window for a sign of Shayla in our idling van, hoping she hasn't decided to try to drive home. Across the window waits a display of valuables on a black velour table cloth: Edison cylinder, 1978 Gibson hollow-body guitar, twelve-inch R2D2, 1959 Barbie in zebra-stripe maillot suit, Scooby Doo lunchbox, Laurel and Hardy dolls collapsed together like stoned chimney sweeps.

A song pops in my head, something my grandfather, who heated his house with a coal furnace into the 1980's, used to sing: "Little Tom Tinker, he sat on a clinker, and he began to cry. Ma-ma, Ma-ma! What a poor boy am I!"

"Mr. Babbick?" Josie calls, raising my pamphlet. She scrunches her face and blinks at it. "Sorry—Baddock, Bobcott?

"Babcock," I say, rising.

Josie holds the pamphlet at arm's length, bugs her eyes. "You're handwriting's impossible to read, dude! Get up here!"

I lead Avery to the seat opposite Josie. We wait, hunched in our chairs, watching her rat-a-tat typing. She grins and bats her eyes. She offers her hand over her laptop, a swan-necked feminine gesture, like a duchess dipping into a bag of imported chocolates. I take her hand.

"Hello, hello. Nice to meet you. I'm Josie. Any relation to the Babcocks in Bozeman?"

"Don't think so," I say. "Why?"

"Babcocks in Bozeman got a lot a money," she says, nodding, typing. "Got a street named after 'em. Loaded."

"Maybe I should find out. Could be in for some."

"Then give it to me!" Avery says.

Josie pauses, winks at Avery, and types. "Girl after my own heart."

"That where you're from?" I say. "Bozeman?"

"Livingston," she says. "Which is a"—she squints at the ceiling—"*hole* if I ever saw one." A woman belly laughs behind us. Josie chuckles back and makes a shooting gesture at the woman. "So what do you have?"

"My Nazi dagger," I say.

With as much pageantry as I can summon, I remove the dagger from my bag and lay it like a papal relic on the table. Josie snatches it up twirls it like a busted G. I. Joe. The scent of microwave chili drifts across the table.

"Oh, a nice one," she says. "Is it SS?"

"SA," I say. "*Sturmabteilung*."

Josie types, props a Bic pen behind her ear, smacks her gum. "Where'd you get it?"

"My grandfather got it in the war. I inherited it. I'm not sure I want to sell it. I want to get it priced, though. See how much it's worth."

Josie drops her shoulders and looks at me. Her hands hover over her keyboard. Her red nails are sculpted drops of candle wax.

"What's your best guess?" she says. "Anybody tell you how much?"

Heat clogs my lungs. "Eight hundred," I say. "Twelve hundred."

Josie nods and clicks her nails on her keyboard, but her face has changed. She casts a glance at the jar of "sweet tea."

"Why'd you want to sell something like that?" she says, backspacing. "Seems pretty prized to me."

A man clears a gob of phlegm from his throat. I feel the mob behind me coil into a chow line of sullen marines. When I reply, I address the race of scuzzy, bloodshot-eyed ex-convicts I have joined, every cutpurse and caitiff hawking his dead grandmother's costume jewelry in every tetanus-blown opium den around the world.

"It would have to be worth a lot to sell."

Josie's eyelids droop. "Twelve hundred sounds like a lot to me."

She pokes computer keys, as if harpooning ants with her fingernail, swirls her mouse around, checks her screen. Her bottom lip juts sideways.

"So do you want to sell it or not?"

"How much is it worth?" I ask.

She sits back, her expression a blank application. "Best bet, try Third Reich dot com, or eBay. Okay?"

"Okay," I say.

"So nice to meet you."

"You as well."

Before the cell of hitmen and loan sharks in the room can jump us for our loose change, I take my treasure and daughter and escape to the tune of "You're the One That I Want."

* * *

The problem with family stories is truth gets lost in the details.

Here's one I'll never tell.

The sun dashes pleasant heat on our street, so it must be early fall or late spring. Shayla—she's in the fourth grade—marches down the sidewalk, lugging her backpack, which rides her shoulder like a glittery pink tumor. The scowl on her face could bulldoze our house. She wears the same turquoise and brown-striped shirt and brown gauchos she's been wearing for the last month. Her hair is plastered in hair-spray, slicked into a flint-hard ponytail, and her Emo-fringe bangs hang over one eye like a dislocated shutter.

Somehow, we end up in my room. She tells me (where is my wife? why am I home, alone, in the middle of the morning?) she wasn't feeling well, that the substitute teacher let her walk home. At this moment, the scene squeals and spools like a fast-forwarded VHS tape, and I am sitting on the bed, where I'll be chained like Daddy Prometheus for the rest of my life, telling Shayla she's going back to school. Shayla sits on the floor, howling, raging. She clutches a framed portrait of our family—my wife, myself, and our girls, Shayla and Tate and Avery.

Over and over, Shayla hammers the picture of our smiling faces into the carpet. Her cries reach a ferocious pitch, like an ogre dashing a villager on flagstones. Each swing smashes the picture to the floor with greater force, as if she's trying to ring the bell atop some satanic carnival game. The porcelain picture frame, carved and painted to look like laurels of daisies, shatters into shrapnel that clatters against the walls. She picks up the rectangle of glass that held the picture in place and starts to hit it against the ground—softly at first, testing it against the chunks of porcelain, nicking the cheery faces of our cherubic family—then with a shriek of hatred smashes it against the floor.

Silence.

Numb, I pray she's done.

She examines her hand like someone checking a roasted marshmallow. A sparkling line of blood trickles down her finger, filling the wrinkles in her knuckle.

"What do we need to do?" I say.

"Clean it up," she says.

Now whenever I enter my room, I feel like I'm walking across tiny knives of glass.

* * *

The *Parteiadler* in my Nazi dagger's pommel shows the eagle looking over its left shoulder. After Hitler's ascendance, the eagle looked over its right shoulder, becoming the *Reichsadler*. For some reason, my Nazi dagger's eagle still looks over

its left shoulder in 1941, still waiting to hear the story everyone heard ten years ago, unaware of the change in power.

The winter of 1941, the year Viktor Lutze was *Stabschef-SA* (Chief of Staff) and my mother was born, the materials used to make my Nazi dagger became scarce in Germany. Isn't that the ultimate horror? Running out of material?

* * *

Outside, rain turns to snow. Hand-in-hand, Avery and I dodge the storm of slushy white bombs, zigzagging toward the van like refugees evading mortar fire. The clumps of heavy flakes slant in rhythmic flurries, like broken bags of bric-a-brac shaken from shelves of sky, melting on car hoods, packing wet bombast on the sides of craft stores and drive-thrus.

"Why didn't you sell it?" Avery asks. "How much were they going to give you?"

I jump in the van and slam the door, dagger in hand. The hanger clip rattles against the scabbard. Tribal bongos throttle the dashboard. The car smells like a florist shop. Shayla paints peach-blossom gloss on her lips.

"He didn't sell it!" Avery says.

"Is it worth anything?" Shayla says, blinking at her reflection.

I don't answer—I'm not sure how—until we're in traffic, heading north on Hitt Road where four "Occupy Idaho Falls" protesters patrol an intersection under the drooping, alien eye of a streetlamp. An elderly woman wears a taupe ski jacket and vinyl rain bonnet. She holds a pale pistachio poster. Her message streams like violet mascara: *I Am Not a Republican or Democrat. I Am a Human Being.*

The vocalist on the radio sings: *We found love in a hopeless place*. I listen for a while, thinking about what the lyrics are saying, tapping my fingers on the wheel. The song's keyboards beep on rapid torture mode like a two-note car alarm. Then, using a studio recording trick, the song ratchets up a vortex of thirteen higher keys, like a robot twisting off its head.

The light changes, and I speed ahead, squinting down the road. A north-south convoy of vehicles rolls through a corkscrewing grotto of snow, a dual passage to opposing dimensions. On the horizon, above telephone lines and stripped treetops, the clouds unzip a slash of uncontaminated blue. From where I view the world, mad tufts of flakes streak across the vent of sky, and I'm reminded of the way it snows sometimes in this part of the state: you, in the center of the storm, while up ahead, maybe a mile away, others walk in the clear. I snap off the radio.

"Hey!" Shayla says.

"Did I ever tell you about this dagger?" I say. "Where I got it?"

Shayla huffs and turns away. "From the war, blah, blah, blah!" She flips down the visor mirror and bugs her eyes at her reflection, fiddling with her eyelashes.

"You don't remember your Great Grandpa Dixon," I say, "but we took you to meet him when you were a baby, when he was blind—"

She stops primping. "Wait, why was he blind?"

"People just, sometimes when they get old, they lose their sight. It's something that happens."

Shayla stares through the windshield, examining the floating shelf of law books that records this injustice.

"He was almost ninety," I say, "in that rest home in Ashton, when you were a baby, and we took you to see him, you sat in the sheets between his feet. We said, 'Grandpa, here's your great-granddaughter, Shayla.' His face changed, and he said, 'Great granddaughter? Well, I wish I could see her.' We said, 'She's a baby. She has red hair.' He sat back like he was shocked and said, 'Red hair!' Then he reached out—he never saw you, you don't remember—and waved his hand until it landed on your head, and you squirmed and shook it off—"

"Aw, cute!"

"—and he ran his hand down your shoulder, like he was sight-reading your arm, and you squeezed his thumb. I don't know if you know, but your Grandma Babcock, my mom, she didn't really know her dad until she was three years old. Once he came back through Detroit, from a month of military camp, and showed up at their back door in this old bum's coat and fake beard, begging with a tin cup, just to scare your grandma when she answered the door."

"Really?"

"He was a jokester. My mom went to a scary movie—*Psycho*, I think, or *Wait Until Dark*—and before she came back that night, he made a freaky dummy out of some old clothes, with a basketball for a head, and set it at the top of the stairs, and when my mom started walking up the stairs, she screamed!"

"Really?"

"I think she moved the dummy to the toilet in his bathroom, to get him back the next morning when he got up. Thing I remember is he always took us fishing—twenty of us out there in the Teton Basin, all the cousins running around with poles, jabbing each other in the eye. I used to like to go, but we had to walk through these cow pastures. I was scared of the cows."

"Why?"

"They'd come running up and trample you. I was just a kid. So one day, he took us fishing, and I think he forgot where he was because we ended up stranded on the bank of this flooded river, and we couldn't get to our spot. I said, 'Grandpa, how are we going to get across?' He thought about it, looked at me, and said, 'We'll jump! Get on my back, boy!' So he hoisted me up piggyback, and he starts running toward the river—chugging full-steam in his waders, singing army songs, our poles and nets and tackle boxes and bait cans clanking around—and I was squeezing his neck, ready for take-off, and, I swear, up to where he skidded to a stop in the cattails at the edge of the river and started laughing, I thought he was going to take me walking across the sky."

Matthew James Babcock teaches literature, creative writing, and composition at BYU-Idaho in Rexburg. His essay, "The Handicap Bug," was recently listed as "notable" in *Best American Essays* 2012. He expresses his love and gratitude to his daughter, Shayla, for allowing this essay to be published.