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a novel

brock clarke

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Though the events in this book bear similarity to those of that long malaise, my life, many of the characters and happenings are creations solely of the imagination. In such cases, I of course disclaim any responsibility for their resemblance to real people or events, which would be coincidental In creating such characters, I have drawn freely from the imagination and adhered only loosely to the pattern of my past life. To this extent, and for this reason, I ask to be judged as a writer of fantasy.

Frederick Exley, *A Fan's Notes*

First session with new patient — M. — and his mother. Just a boy — nine years old — but with an active — active and, indeed, *overactive* — imagination. M. believes strongly that his father left him (M.) and his (M.'s) mother to join the army and go to Iraq. His mother believes strongly that his father left them, but not to join the army and not to go to Iraq. What is certain is that wherever the father is, he's no longer in the family home. What is also certain is that the mother is beautiful. So beautiful that for a moment I forget that I'm here to talk to M. and not to look at his mother. When I realize that I'm ignoring my patient, I give myself a stern reprimand, mentally.

"Do you know why you're here?" I ask M., as I ask every patient in our first session.

"My mother thinks I'm making things up," he replies. "She doesn't believe anything I tell her."

"I just want you to get better, M.," his mother tells him. "It's not a matter of who believes who." Then she turns to me. "Is it?" she asks, and touches my right forearm very gently, with just the tips of her left index and ring fingers. When she removes her fingers, my arm — my arm and, indeed, my arm *hair* — tingles. It tingles again as I write these words.

"Indeed, no," I assure M. But I am inclined to believe his mother.

Doctor's Notes (Entry 1)

Exley

Part One

Anything Can Be a Beginning As Long As You Call It One

My name is Miller Le Ray. I am ten years old. I was nine years old when my dad went to Iraq, and I was still nine years old eight months later when I found out he was back from Iraq and in the VA hospital. The day I went to see him in the VA hospital was the day I started trying to find Exley. Exley was the guy who wrote my dad's favorite book, *A Fan's Notes*. Mother calls the Exley I eventually found a Man Who Just *Said* He Was Exley. But I just call him Exley. Because this is one of the things I learned on my own: you need to say things simply, especially when they're complicated.

So why don't I begin there: the day I went to see my dad in the VA hospital. Exley's book begins toward the end, but he calls it a beginning anyway. Because this is one of the things I learned from Exley: anything can be a beginning as long as you call it one.

A Beginning

I woke up on Sunday, the eleventh of November, 200–, knowing that my dad had come home from the war. I knew this without anyone having to tell me; I knew it in my bones, the way you always know the most important things. I jumped out of bed and ran into my parents' room. The bed was unmade and there was no one in it. The room was as empty as the bed. I checked the upstairs bathroom. The faucet was dripping, like always. Before my dad went away, Mother sometimes joked that he was the kind of guy who would join up and go to Iraq just so he wouldn't have to fix the faucet. After he left, she stopped making the joke. But anyway, the bathroom was also empty. I went back to his bedroom, in case my dad had snuck in there while I was in the other rooms looking for him. But it was empty, too. Then I heard a sound coming from downstairs. It was Mother, crying. Mother never cried. The only other time I had ever heard her cry was when my dad went to Iraq in the first place. This was, of course, how I knew my dad was home: I'd heard Mother crying without knowing I'd heard her crying. When we say we know something in our bones, we mean we don't know yet how we know what we know. This is what we mean by "bones."

So I ran downstairs and followed the sound of Mother's crying, which led me to the bathroom. The door was closed. I went to knock, then almost didn't. Because it was hard to have an intelligent conversation with Mother when she was in the bathroom. I knew, from experience, that if I knocked on the bathroom door, this is how the conversation would go.

"I'm in the bathroom," Mother would say.

"What are you doing in there?" I would ask.

"Miller, I am *in* the *bathroom*," Mother would say.

"I *know*," I would say. "But what are you *doing* in there?"

But this time was different. It was different because Mother had been crying and I wanted to know why, and my dad was back from the war and I wanted to know where he was. I knocked on the door, and Mother stopped crying immediately.

“I’m in the bathroom,” she said.

“Why were you crying?” I asked. And then, before she could answer, I asked, “Where’s my dad?” Which started her crying again.

I took a step back from the door and thought about what I knew. I absolutely knew my dad was back from Iraq. Except he wasn’t in our house, which he would have been if he’d been able to be in our house. Mother was crying, which she’d never done, as far as I knew, except for that once. All of this was going on in Watertown, New York. Fort Drum is in Watertown. It’s an army fort. I go to school with dozens of kids whose dads and mothers are based at Fort Drum before and after going to Iraq. I knew from them that when their parents left Iraq for Watertown, they went to one of three places. My dad wasn’t in the house — my eyes told me that. My dad wasn’t in the base morgue, either — my bones told me that, just as surely as they’d told me my dad was back from Iraq in the first place. That left only one place where he could be: the VA hospital.

I went upstairs, got dressed, brushed my teeth, walked back downstairs, got Exley’s book from my dad’s study, put it in my backpack, shouldered the backpack, then took a few steps toward the bathroom. The door to the bathroom was still closed, and I could hear Mother still crying behind it, quieter now, but steady, like an all-day rain. *Please don’t cry*, I wanted to say to her. *I’m going to go get my dad and bring him home and everything will be all right. So please don’t cry.* But I didn’t think I could say anything like that and not feel ridiculous afterward. I thought of my dad, of what he might say to Mother under these kinds of circumstances. Probably something not exactly comforting, probably something beginning with the phrase “For Christ’s sake.” I didn’t think I could, or should, say that, either. So instead of saying either of those two things, I said, “I’m going to ride my bike,” although possibly not loud enough to be heard over her crying. In any case, Mother kept crying. And so I walked into the garage, where I kept my Huff, climbed on, and pedaled to the VA hospital.

Doctor's Notes (Entry 2)

My second session with M. My area of expertise, of course, is the juvenile mind, but perhaps a physical description is in order nonetheless. M. has light blue eyes and red cheeks that suggest either robustness or shame and hair that one might call dirty blond. In M.'s case, the description pertains both to the color of his hair and to its cleanliness. M.'s hair is not *long* but *high* and looks as though it has been slept on: it is flat in sections, unruly in others. I can see comb marks and surmise that someone has tried and failed to tame it. I assume that someone to be his mother. Oh, his mother! I somehow restrain myself from asking if she is well, if she's waiting for him outside in the car, if she has spoken of me since our first session. I can see her in my mind's eye: her shiny black hair, her eyes so deeply blue that they, too, look black, her angular white face, the total effect being coal placed on a taut pillow. She is as beautiful in memory as she was in my office four days ago. Despite his hair, and despite his tiny teeth (M. can be mature in most ways except for his dentition, which remains entirely infantile), M. is himself what one would call a good-looking kid, although he looks nothing like his lovely mother. I assume he takes after his father.

On that subject: I begin by asking M. to tell me the circumstances behind his father's going to Iraq. I make this request as though holding the assumption that the father truly is in Iraq, although I do not, in fact, actually assume that.

"My dad," M. says immediately, as though waiting for me to ask the question, "went to Iraq on Friday, the twentieth of March, 200-." This is how Miller speaks the date: "Two thousand blank." Odd—odd and, indeed, *quite strange*—although I don't say so. Instead, I ask M. how he can be so certain about the date.

“Because it was the last day of school before spring vacation,” he says. I am about to ask him how he can be so certain it was the last day of school, but he anticipates the question. “I remember it was the last day of school because I didn’t have to bring any books or folders or notebooks home. Just an empty backpack. I was swinging my empty backpack around by one of its loops as I walked home. It made a whistling sound as I swung it, and then it made a crying sound. I stopped swinging the backpack and listened. The crying sound was still there. I walked toward it, toward my house, which was less than a block away. When I got to the house next to ours, I could see through the neighbors’ hedge that Mother was standing in our driveway, crying.”

“Crying?” I ask.

“*Really* crying,” M. says. “You could see the tears running down her face, into her mouth. I’d never seen or heard her cry. It scared me. It made me not want to get too close to her, so I stayed on our neighbors’ side of the hedge.”

“Your mother was crying?” I ask again, unable to get past the image. I can feel my eyes water at the thought of hers watering. But M. appears not to hear me. His eyes are closed. It strikes me that this story is something he has memorized — memorized and, indeed, *committed to memory*.

“My dad was in his Lumina, which was running and pointed down the driveway, toward the street. The driver’s-side window was down and he leaned out of it and said, ‘Maybe I should go to Iraq, too.’”

“How did he say those words?” I ask.

M. opens his eyes and looks at me quizzically. “With his mouth,” M. says.

“No, no,” I say. “In what tone? In what manner? Did he emphasize the word ‘should’? The word ‘I’? Did the sentence sound like a threat? A promise?”

“It sounded sad,” M. says, closing his eyes again.

“Sad,” I repeat. “And what did your mother say in response?”

“T,” M. says. T., I know, is the boy’s father’s name. M. says the name in his own voice, but I assume he’s repeating what his mother said. M. gulps once, twice, as though trying to catch his breath, and I wonder if the gulping is his or his mother’s. Perhaps it is both. “*Please.*”

I do not ask how she said the word “please,” because I can hear her voice in his, can see her lovely wet eyes telling M.’s father to stay. I wonder how anyone could *go* when those eyes said, *Stay*. But evidently M.’s father went anyway. “Then my dad rolled up his window, pulled out of the driveway, and then drove away.”

“Did he see you standing there?” I ask.

“No,” M. says. “But Mother did. She’d walked to the end of the driveway to look at my dad driving away from her. And then she turned to go back into the house and saw me behind the bush. Then she stopped crying, smiled, and asked, ‘How was your last day of school?’”

“That was most considerate of her,” I say. “Most considerate and, indeed, most *thoughtful*.”

M. opens his eyes and gives me the look that all my patients give me when they tire of saying “Whatever” with their mouths and instead say it with their eyes. Then he closes them once more and says, “So I asked her why my dad was going to Iraq.”

“And her answer?”

“She said, ‘Lots of people are going to Iraq, Miller, but your dad isn’t one of them.’ And then she turned around and went into the house.”

M. opens his eyes and considers me as I consider his story. One aspect of the tale seems clear enough: M.’s mother and father had a fight, and his father left them because of it. Either M. is omitting the reason for the fight, or he doesn’t know the reason. But married persons only argue over two things: money and sexual infidelity. Every mental health professional knows this, even those, like me, who do not specialize in the mental health of married persons, and who do not have great piles of money, and who have never been married and who have never been sexually unfaithful and who, frankly, have never had much of an opportunity to be sexually unfaithful. But regardless, that part of the tale seems explainable enough. Other aspects of M.’s story seem inconsistent — M. knows the exact month and date of his father’s departure but can’t, or won’t, specify the year? — but are most likely neither here nor there: I suspect, as with the cause of M.’s parents’ fight, we will “get to the bottom of it” soon enough. But the most troublesome aspect of M.’s tale is his belief that his father’s saying that “maybe” he “should” go to Iraq constitutes proof

that the father, in fact, *did* go to Iraq. Does M. really believe this, or is he merely pretending to? And if the latter, does he know he's pretending, or does he think he's telling the truth? I decide to press M. on the matter. "So *that's* how you know your father went to Iraq?" I ask him. "Because he said that 'maybe' he 'should' go there?"

"You sound just like my mother," M. says. I thrill to hear those words — I sound like M.'s mother! I have something in common with M.'s mother! — but M. doesn't appear to feel similarly. His red cheeks go pale and his blue eyes tear up; he runs a hand through his hair, sending it even further ceilingward. When I ask if he's "all right," he doesn't answer. This is both the comfort and the terror of the juvenile mind. One knows that if the juvenile mouth is not moving, then the mind is; but one does not necessarily know *what* that mind is moving away from or toward. "What are you thinking?" I ask M., as I ask most of my patients when I want to know their thoughts. Most of my patients will, in fact, tell me, a phenomenon I described two years ago at the North Country Mental Health Professionals' annual meeting in my speech "Ask and You Shall Receive: A Commonsensical Approach to the Juvenile Mind." But not M.; he simply stares at me with his faint blue eyes. Those eyes are most changeable: one moment they seem unbearably sad, and the next full of danger; one moment M. looks like he's heartbroken, the next he looks like the hangman. In short, M. appears to be no ordinary patient, just as M.'s mother appears to be no ordinary patient's mother. As for M.'s father, it is uncertain what he is and what he isn't. Thus far, he is an enigma, in deed and in word. "Other than your father saying he might go to Iraq," I ask, "why do you think he would?"

"Would what?"

"Go to Iraq."

"I have no idea," M. says quickly, too quickly. *Yes, you do*, I think but do not say. Instead, I give M. an assignment. I ask him to write down something important about his father.

"Something important?" he asks.

"Something you remember about him," I say. "Something you love. Some lesson he's taught you. I'd like you to write this down and then share it with me during our weekly session."

M. nods like he thinks this is something he can do. “When?” he asks.

“Whenever you feel like it,” I say, and he nods again. This seems like progress, of a sort. But still, something about M.’s story and his father’s role in it nags at me.

“Your father told your mother that maybe he should go to Iraq, too,” I say, and then I repeat the final word: “‘Too.’ What do you think he meant by ‘too?’”

M. nods, then cocks his head slightly to the right. Only now can I tell what M. is thinking. I can tell he’s asked himself the same question. Finally, he says, “Maybe he meant that he was going to Iraq, just like everyone else around here?” And by the way he says this — as a question, not as a statement — I can tell that M. still has not found the answer.

The VA Hospital

I knew where the VA hospital had to be: on Washington Street. Because that's where all the hospitals and social services are in Watertown. That's where Good Samaritan is — the place where I was born and where, I found out later, Exley was born, too — and where the county blood clinic and the county mental hospital and the county welfare office and the county substance-abuse clinic and the county domestic-abuse clinic and the library and the historical society and the YMCA and *Watertown Daily Times* all are, too. It's the most popular street in Watertown: people are always outside, lining the sidewalks. Whenever I was with Mother or my dad as we drove down Washington Street, I felt like I was in a parade and the people on the sidewalks were watching me. This time, I was the parade all by myself — me and my bike. I walked my bike past the same people, again and again, as I looked for the VA hospital. Past the five guys outside the YMCA, smoking their cigarettes: one half of their faces seemed to be in shadow even though it was noon and sunny out, and the other half seemed to be winking at me. Past the two fat women standing at the end of a huge line outside the county welfare office but facing away from the office and toward the street: they were dressed in bright green and pink sweatpants and black bubble jackets and were staring at me with their round white faces and tiny eyes, like I had something they wanted, something they didn't think they'd get from the welfare office. I tried not to stare at them and kept walking, past the soldier wearing his camo and his beret, with his pant legs tucked into his high boots, standing in the middle of the sidewalk and talking on his cell phone. You can't go anywhere in Watertown and not see a soldier talking on a cell phone, just like everyone else who isn't in a uniform. I don't know why this surprised me so much the first time I noticed it, but it did. When my

dad first went to Iraq, I used to stop every soldier I'd see and interrupt his phone conversation and ask him if he knew my dad. One time, when I interrupted one soldier's phone call, he handed me the phone, said, "Here you go." "Hello?" I said, thinking it'd be my dad. But it wasn't. It was some woman saying, "Reggie? Is that you? Reggie, I'm *talking* to you." I handed Reggie back his phone and said, "That isn't my dad." "No," Reggie said sadly. "But I wish it was." He put the phone to his ear and said, "I'm here, Sharon," and then with his free hand he made a gun, put the index finger to the side of his head, pulled the trigger of his thumb, and mouthed the word, *Pow!*

Anyway, none of the soldiers I asked ever knew my dad, and so I stopped asking them. I walked right past the soldier, toward a guy shouldering a duffel bag, coming right at me. He was wearing a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off; there was a black tattoo of a vine creeping from underneath the right sleeve all the way to his knuckles. He stopped in front of me, raking his right forearm with his left hand, tilling the skin, I guess, before he planted another vine tattoo in it. And his eyes were bloody. I don't mean they were red, like he had allergies or had been crying; I mean they were filled with blood, like he'd been wounded somewhere in his sockets, behind his eyeballs. His hair was military short except for a ridge of slightly longer hair going from his forehead to the nape of his neck. It was the kind of haircut you get when you don't know what kind of haircut to get. He was young, too. He hadn't even started to shave yet; he was probably only thirteen years old. That was the scariest thing about him. Like he would do something to me that a normal kid would do, but much worse. I could imagine him taking my bike away from me, for instance, and then strangling me with it.

But he didn't do that. Instead, he asked, "Yo, where's the library?"

We were both standing right in front of the library, but I didn't want to say those words. I was afraid they would sound like this: *You're standing right in front of it*, stupid. So I just pointed. The guy looked in the direction I'd pointed, and I kept walking, toward the bottom of Washington Street, where I hit the Public Square, turned around, crossed the street, and walked back. It was the fifth time I'd walked up and down the street, and *still*, I couldn't find the VA hospital. *I could not find it*. I knew there

was a VA hospital in Watertown because I knew some of my classmates' fathers had been patients there. And I knew the VA hospital had to be on Washington Street. Because that's where all the hospitals were. Because if it wasn't on Washington Street, then I couldn't imagine where it was. And if the VA hospital wasn't on Washington Street, and I couldn't find it, then how was I going to find my dad? I started to panic a little just thinking about it. Then I saw the guy with the cutoff denim jacket crossing the street, stopping traffic, coming right toward me, and I started to panic a lot more. He looked mad, like I'd given him really bad directions; he looked so mad that it didn't seem like it would do any good to say I was sorry. This might be why I said, when he reached my side of the street, "Do you know where the VA hospital is?"

His face changed. He stopped looking mad and started looking helpful, like a Good Samaritan with a bad haircut. "You're standing right in front of it, *stupid*," he said, and pointed.

I looked in the direction he was pointing, and there it was, right between the historical society and the *Daily Times* building. The VA hospital was set way back from the street, with a big lawn and big oak and maple trees between it and me, which is probably why I hadn't noticed it. The other hospitals on Washington Street had been built sometime after my parents had been born but before I had, but the VA hospital was from another time: it was made of big blocks of gray stone and had two huge Corinthian columns in front. It looked like a temple, not a hospital. We were studying ancient Greece and Rome in social studies and had done a unit on columns. That's how I knew the VA hospital's columns were Corinthian and not Doric.

I turned away from the VA hospital and toward the guy to thank him. He looked mad again. He bared his teeth; some of them were missing, and the ones that weren't were the color of old newspapers. "Yo," he said, "*where* is the *library*?" He asked this like he'd asked me the question many times, and not just once, and like I hadn't answered him. I had, although not with my mouth. So I said, "It's right across the street," and then pointed. He looked where I pointed, and while he was looking away, I ran with my bike toward the VA hospital.

The woman at the VA hospital's front desk didn't look up at me as I

walked toward her, but instead kept her eyes on her computer monitor, which hummed like a spaceship. I couldn't see what she looked like from the waist down (the desk the woman was sitting behind came up to the middle of my chest), but from the waist up she looked like a nurse: she was wearing a blue cardigan sweater, and underneath I could see what looked like a lighter blue medical uniform. Her hair was short, curled but not curly, and so black it had to be gray underneath. She looked a lot like the nurse at my school, Case Middle School. The nurse at school was always telling me, when I came into her office with a headache or stomachache, that no, I wasn't sick, and so no, she wasn't going to let me go home early. I could imagine this nurse telling me, *No, you can't see your dad.* Or even worse, *No, your dad isn't here. No, there's no patient here named Tom Le Ray.*

There was a set of swinging doors to the right of the front desk. I had begun to think about trying to walk toward and then through them before the woman saw me when she said, still looking at her computer screen, "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see my dad," I said. "He's a patient here."

The woman finally looked away from her computer screen and at me. She pursed her lips, crinkled her eyes, and basically arranged her face to look sympathetic. "What's your father's name?" she asked in a voice that was much gentler than when she'd asked, "Can I help you?"

"Thomas Le Ray," I said.

The woman nodded again, looked back at her computer, typed for a few seconds, and then said, "Room D-1." She nodded in the direction of the swinging doors. "Right through there, first room on the right." I thanked her and had turned to walk through the doors when she added, "I *wondered* when someone was going to come see him."

"Who?" I said.

"Your father," she said. Her lips were still pursed, but not as sympathetically as before. "He's been here two weeks and you're his first visitor."

"Two weeks?" I said. I wondered why Mother was crying today if my dad had already been in the hospital for two weeks. Maybe that's why she was crying: because he'd been there for two weeks and she hadn't told me

about it or gone to see him herself and she felt guilty about it. Or maybe she hadn't been told until today. I kept hearing — from the news, from Mother, from pretty much everyone — how we were struggling to win the war; maybe we were struggling to call people to tell them their husbands and dads were home from the war and in the VA hospital, too. “Why didn't anyone call and tell us?”

“I'm sure someone did,” the woman said. She returned her eyes to the computer, pounded on the keys for a few seconds, and then said, “Yes. Apparently someone called and talked to your father's wife.”

“Mother,” I muttered.

The woman frowned at me, then at the computer. “It says here it was his wife.”

“No, no, it was,” I said. “His wife is my mother.”

“Yes, well,” the woman said. “When your mother was informed that your father was a patient here, she apparently said, ‘Very funny, whoever you are. Tell Miller very funny and nice try.’ And then she hung up.” Then the woman, who wasn't wearing glasses, turned away from the computer and looked at me the way someone with glasses looks at you when they look at you over their glasses.

“Huh,” I said, and tried to think back to two weeks ago. There was a night around that time when Mother was especially grumpy; when I tried to cheer her up by telling her a joke I'd heard at school about what kind of cheese you're not allowed to have (the punchline is “Not yo cheese,” but said really fast to also sound like “Nacho cheese”), Mother said, “You think you're so funny, Miller,” and then asked me if I needed to see my doctor more than once a week. It made no sense then, but it did now. But I didn't want to go into all that with the woman. So all I asked was, “Did you call my mother today, too?” I was sure they had, because Mother had been crying in the bathroom. But the woman looked at her computer again and said, “No.”

“Huh,” I said again. “Weird.”

“That's one word for it,” the woman said, then arranged her face again. “But it doesn't matter. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you now. And you've come on the right day, too!”

“I have?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “Your father has been quite the sleepyhead for the past two weeks. But today he finally woke up!”

I pushed through the swinging doors, and then I ran, my sneakers squeaking like crazy: past utility closets, X-ray labs, vending machines, and more vending machines. Why did I run? Because two weeks was a long time to be asleep in the hospital; I had the feeling that if I didn’t get to my dad right away, he’d fall back asleep or . . . well, I didn’t want to finish the thought. *Please, Dad*, I said to him in my head. *Hold on*.

I ducked into the room on the right, closed the door behind me. And there was my dad.

He was lying in bed, sleeping. At least, his eyes were closed. I walked over to his bed and stood there, looking at him. My dad looked different, so different that I checked his bracelet to make sure that it really was him (it was). Before my dad went to Iraq, he almost never combed his hair or shaved, but someone had recently given him a buzz cut and shaved his face, too. He looked groomed and awful. I’d dressed as a hobo for Halloween the year before and wished I still had the burnt cork Mother had used to whisker my face so I could use it to whisker my dad’s. The room smelled like applesauce and baby wipes. The table beside my dad was piled high with Dixie cups, which I guessed he used to wash down whatever pills the nurses brought to him.

“Hi, Dad,” I said quietly, very quietly, the way you speak to someone who is sleeping, even if you want him to wake up. “It’s Miller.”

My dad didn’t answer. My poor dad. Because I was pretty sure that when the nurse said my dad had been “quite the sleepyhead,” that meant he’d been in a coma. There were a bunch of tubes running out of him and into a bunch of bags and machines; one tube went from his nose to a machine that looked like the kind of thing clowns blow up balloons with at your birthday party. The machine didn’t seem to be on. I tried hard to trust the machines and the tubes and to not think at all about what would happen if they stopped working. I tried hard not to think of what might have put my dad in a coma, just like, over the past eight months, I had tried not to think about what he was doing in Iraq: if, at that moment, he was trying to kill someone; if, at that moment, someone was trying to kill

him. Because I knew he was; I knew they were. Because every time I did think of that, I started to cry. And as everyone knows, Crying Doesn't Do Anyone Any Good. That's why I'd been trying to Stay Positive for the past eight months, and I tried it now, too. I thought that at least my dad was back in Watertown. I walked closer and touched my dad's legs, his arms, through his blanket. They were still there. At least he had his legs and arms. And the Dixie cups were a good sign: that meant that he was awake enough to drink out of the cups, at least some of the time; at least, even if he'd been in a coma and was asleep now, he'd woken up earlier today. At least he was *alive*: I could see his chest rising and falling. But there wasn't a book open on it. This was weird. Before he'd gone to Iraq, my dad was an English professor at Jefferson County Community College. I don't think I'd ever seen him lying down without reading a book. Or sleeping without a book lying open on his chest. And when I say "a book," I mean just one: *A Fan's Notes*, by Frederick Exley.

I took the book out of my backpack, pulled a chair close to my dad's bed, sat down, took a deep, deep breath. This is the kind of breath you take before you do something that you're not supposed to but that might be, probably is, the right thing to do even if you're not supposed to do it. Anyway, I took the breath, and then another, then looked at my dad. His left eye was closed, but the right one was open and looking at me.

"Hey, bud," my dad said in a croaky, tired-sounding voice.

"Dad!" I said. I jumped out of my chair and hugged him, or tried to. I'm not sure if you've ever tried to hug someone who's connected to tubes, but the trick is to hug that person hard enough for him to know that you're doing it, but soft enough so that the tubes don't. Anyway, I hugged my dad as best I could. When I stopped hugging him, I sat back in my chair. Both of my dad's eyes were closed now, and I was scared for a minute that I'd done something to the tubes after all. But then my dad said, "For Christ's sake, bud, what time is it?"

"I don't know," I said. I looked around the room for a clock but I didn't see one. When I looked back at my dad, his eyes were still closed, but there was a slight, sleepy smile on his face.

"It's time for you to stop holding *A Fan's Notes* and start reading it to me," he said. "I know you can do that, can't cha?"

“Sure,” I said, trying to act like it was no big deal, even though my heart was beating so fast I thought I might need one of my dad’s machines to slow it down. I opened the book. I skipped all the early pages that aren’t numbered and so aren’t really part of the book and went to page 1. I read the title of chapter 1 — “The Nervous Light of Sunday” — to myself, and then the first sentence out loud to my dad: “‘On Sunday, the eleventh of November, 196–, while sitting at the bar of the New Parrot Restaurant in my home town, Watertown, New York . . .’”

Before I go any further, I should say this: you might not know that Exley’s book had Watertown in it, but I did, just like I knew it had swearing and drinking and sex and crazy people and insane asylums and electroshock therapy and insulin shock therapy and misogyny and football and English teachers in it, too. I knew all this even though I hadn’t actually read the book. And how did I come to know that?