



THE
MOST
IMPORTANT
THING

STORIES
ABOUT **SONS,**
FATHERS &
GRANDFATHERS

BY
AVI

DREAM CATCHER

My dad woke me at six, and by six thirty, he was gripping the leather-covered wheel of his black BMW, with me barely awake, sitting shotgun. He drove as fast as a getaway car trying to get away from something. I had no idea what. But then, our conversations consisted mostly of slapping silences at each other, like phantom Ping-Pong players.

Which was why, though he was my father, I knew as much about him as I did about one of

those lions sitting outside the city's main library. He was there and in charge, but when he talked, it was mostly about rules and expectations, as predictable as a self-winding watch, with smiles as rare as snowballs in August. I could sum up his view on life in five words: *Be ready for the worst.*

Anyway, by seven thirty, we were sitting at Gate 44 at LaGuardia Airport in NYC, with pale lemon sunlight seeping through the plate-glass windows. Most travelers were slumped in hard leather chairs, eyes lidded, occasionally checking cell phones, probably wishing someone cared about their leaving. A few others, bags at their feet, stood by the closed gate door as if nervous that they might be left behind. Overhead television monitors showed the world's latest disasters in gory color. No one seemed to care.

I had my eyes on a brown sparrow, which had gotten inside the terminal. He kept banging against the big windows, trying to fly free. He couldn't. The whole airport was for flying, and here was the one creature that *could* fly, and he was trapped. Then again, by flying, I was

trapped. I think my eighth-grade English teacher would have called this *irony*.

So there I was, new travel bag at my feet, stiff new jeans, a collared shirt, a new jacket, and a haircut that was too short. All this so I would look the way my father wanted me to look.

My father, the chief financial officer for a window-making company, was in his work uniform: dark suit, pale-blue shirt, striped blue tie with a Windsor knot, and a matching pale-blue handkerchief poking out of his jacket breast pocket like a mouse too timid to come out of his hole. Dad's trimmed hair, flecked with gray, was combed back with care. The creases in his trousers were snap-sharp, his face was baby-belly smooth, and he smelled of cologne—his way, I think, of informing people he was alive.

After sitting silently for ten minutes, he said, "I expect your visit to your grandfather will go well."

"What makes you expect that?"

"Paul," he said, "if I have learned anything, it's that people get on better when they do what they have to do. There's an old saying," he

went on. “Learn the rules. Play the rules. Win and you get to change the rules.’ I should also say, If rules are not followed, things fall apart.

“That’s why,” he added as he always did, “you need to be ready for the worst.”

I said, “Guess what? I’d rather not play.”

When he made no reply, I said, “When was the last time you spoke to your father?”

“Two days ago, when I set this up.”

“No, before. Like, what, two, three years ago? You guys aren’t exactly chatty, are you? And I’ve never met him, right? Most of all, you don’t like him. How come?”

He just sat there.

I said, “I know nothing about him. Oh, yeah—he lives in Denver. But we don’t have any pictures of him, so I don’t even know what he looks like. He’s a complete stranger, but I’m visiting him. If you don’t like him, why should I?”

My dad did his library lion likeness, and then said, “I’ll go over it again. There’s a big company audit this week, and I’m in charge. Endless hours. Late hours. By bad luck, your mother is having unexpected surgery, which,

while not a big thing, means she'll need to take it easy and will stay with your aunt. As it happens, you have spring break. I don't want you to be home alone."

Knowing where he was going, it was my turn to say nothing.

So he said, "Three weeks ago, when your mother and I were late getting back because of a canceled flight, meaning you were alone on Saturday night, what happened?"

I said, "I had a few friends over."

"Fifteen friends are not a few. Paul, when you can't trust your family, you wind up not trusting anyone.

"We couldn't call your mom's parents," he went on. "They're away. We called some of your friends' parents. They couldn't help. Too short a notice. But my father was willing for you to come and stay with him."

I said, "In other words, there was no one else to babysit me, so you called your father. Bottom of the barrel, totally. We see Mom's dad and mom every other weekend. You call him Dad; her, Mom. I've never even heard you mention

your mother. We *never* see or talk to *your* father. Now, all of sudden I'm flying across the country to spend a week with him. I'm closer to the moon than to him."

No response.

I said, "What is it? Did he have bad breath, wear socks that didn't match, make you eat gluten-free food? I just want to know why you dislike him so much."

"Maybe it's time you found out."

"Find out *what*?"

"When you get off the plane," he said, "your grandfather promised he'll be waiting. Soon as you meet him, use your cell phone to call your mom. She'll be wanting to hear from you. Otherwise, she'll worry."

"What if he breaks his promise and he's *not* there?"

He actually took my question seriously. "Call my secretary."

"If you'd just tell me *why* you don't like your dad, you could save the price of a ticket to Denver."

"You'll be back next Sunday."

A new thought popped into my head. “Wait a minute!” I said. “Is it that he doesn’t like you?”

“I’ll give you a tip: keep your smart mouth shut.”

A loudspeaker voice said, “Attention please! We are ready to start boarding Flight 633 with service to Denver.”

Dad led me to the check-in counter, where he laid down my ticket and some papers. “I’m Michael Gunderson,” he announced. “This is my son. Paul Gunderson. Unaccompanied minor.” He showed his driver’s license. “His grandfather will be at the Denver gate. If the boy gives you any difficulties, let me know. My number is on the papers.”

He didn’t even say *my* boy — just *the* boy.

The woman smiled at me. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

I gave my father a snappy military salute, but it was wasted on him because he was already moving away, keeping to his schedule and, I’m sure, ready for the worst.

A gatekeeper led me onto the plane. None of the seats were occupied. “You’re 24F — window

seat,” the guy said, and shoved my bag into the bin over my head. “Enjoy your flight.”

I buckled up and watched the ground crew fling suitcases around as if they were garbage bags. I was thinking, *My father doesn't like his father, but he won't say why. Or maybe his father doesn't like him. So keep your mouth shut and be ready for the worst. You're about to spend a week with a stranger.*

My plane touched down at Denver International Airport something like four and a half hours later. Because I was required to stay with a flight attendant, I was one of the last people to get off. When we reached the end of the exit lane, I studied the people standing, in search of someone who looked like my dad.

“Do you see your grandfather?” asked the attendant.

“Don't know what he looks like.”

Even as I spoke, a man came forward. He was tall and skinny with a pale, gaunt face. The shadowy bags under his eyes were big enough

to pack for a month's vacation. He was wearing khaki trousers, khaki shirt, and a blue cap, which proclaimed *Viet Vet* in embroidered gold. The resemblance to my father was creepy: it was as if my father had become an old guy.

"Paul?" he said to me. It came as a question, as if he couldn't—or wouldn't—believe it was me. "Paul Gunderson?"

I held up my hand, like a kid asking a teacher if I could leave the room. Which, right then, I would have liked to do, though the room was a gigantic airport terminal.

The flight attendant asked, "Are you Mr. Gunderson?"

"It's what people call me," the guy said. He seemed reluctant to admit it.

While papers were exchanged, and a driver's license checked, I stared at my grandfather—for that's who I assumed he was—trying to make some sense of him. Right off, he didn't seem friendly. Not a trace of a smile.

Next moment, I realized the flight attendant had abandoned me. That left my grandfather

and me to confront each other like two aliens meeting in space; the only thing in common was that we lived in the same universe.

“Hello,” he said, as if it were the last thing he wanted to say. He even hesitated before holding out a hand. It was obvious: he was as reluctant to meet me as I was to meet him.

All the same, we shook, his hand being hard and stiff.

“Need to stop for food?” he asked. “It’s twenty minutes to my truck. Thirty minutes to my home.”

“I probably won’t starve.”

He gave me a quizzical look, as if not sure if I was trying to be funny. I pretended not to notice.

“Check any bags?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” he said, and led the way along what felt like an endless concourse. Our silence felt equally endless. Now and again, he stole a glance at me, as if trying to decide who I was. I was trying to decide if I should tell him I really was his grandson.

After a while, he said, "You like to be called Paul? Pauly? Something else?"

"Paul works."

"Fine. Paul. People call me Road. Real name Joad, but your father, when he started talking, called me Road. It stuck. How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"You look a lot like your father when he was that age."

"That good or bad?"

He stared straight ahead. "Not sure."

We continued on without talking until he said, "Your mother okay?"

"I was supposed to call her when I arrived."

"Then do it." The tone and command were the way my father talked, an order.

I put down my bags, took out my cell phone. A message popped up telling me the battery was very low. I called quickly. "Hi, Mom. It's me. In Denver. He's right here. Did you want to talk to him? Okay, I will. Bye."

I looked at Road. "She said to say hello, so, hello."

"You're a comedian."

I said, "If people laugh."

"I don't," he said, as if I hadn't noticed.

We started walking again. After five minutes, he said, "I never met your mother. Mickey didn't—doesn't—want me to."

It took me a moment to get that "Mickey" was my father. Back home he was always called Michael.

Road said, "You have brothers or sisters?"

I shook my head, realizing only then that he really knew as little about me as I did about him.

We went on, not talking. His conversational skills made my father seem like one of those shouting sports announcers on ESPN.

In the parking section, he led me to an old Ford pickup truck. "Looks old but it runs new," he said. "Like me. Throw your stuff in the back."

As I dropped my bags in, I noticed the license plate: A red fringe of mountains was depicted along the top. To one side of the number, there was a picture of people in a wagon. Under the number was the word *pioneer*.

"What's *pioneer* mean?" I asked.

"I get that because my ancestor came out

here before 1876, when Colorado became a state. He was looking for gold.”

“Did he find any?”

“Fool’s gold.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing but glitter. All labor. No loot.”

I hauled myself into the truck cab on a seat that had a rip. Dangling from the rearview mirror post was what looked like a spiderweb made of red string, held together by a circle of twigs.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Dream catcher,” said Road, putting on sunglasses. “Ojibwe Indian culture. They say it will catch dreams. You dream much?” he asked.

“Not really. You?”

“Yeah. Lots. Nightmares. Seat belts are the law out here.”

“What kind of nightmares?” I asked.

“The kind that happen if you don’t wear a seat belt.”

I buckled up.

As we drove out of the airport and onto the highway, Road pointed toward the west. “That’s Denver,” he said.

The distant tall buildings looked like a row of stubby birthday candles that had fizzled out. Beyond them were high mountains. It was late April but the summits were still snowcapped. “Does that snow stay all year?” I asked.

“Some of it never melts.”

Wondering if he ever melted, I studied the sky, endless blue without a cloud. I said, “How come my father doesn’t want my mother to meet you?”

“Probably thought I’d scare her away.”

“Would you?”

Road kept his eyes on the highway. Then he said, “You’re not here long enough to hear the all of it.”

I was thinking, *It’s already too long.*

We drove on. Road said, “You worried about your mother?”

“My dad says I shouldn’t.”

He said, “You always do what your dad says?”

“He’s the boss.”

“Really?”

“He thinks so.”

Road said, "How is he?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Just guess?"

I said, "He makes windows, but he's not exactly transparent."

"That sounds like an old joke."

"It is."

Road didn't crack a smile, and it took a few more moments before he said, "Your dad and I don't get along."

"How come?"

He thought some more and then said, "My son—your dad—lives like the guy who drives by mostly checking the rearview mirror. See who might be catching up."

"Who's catching up?" I asked.

"Me," he said. It was a small word, but he managed to stuff a whole lot of anger into it. Eyeing him, I decided that he—thin, wiry, and with a bite—was like a snake ready to strike. I leaned away.

"Anyway," he went on, "as things now stand, you might say you're my only living relative."

“What about my dad?”

Road grunted. “I said *living*.” After a moment, he added, “I say what I think.”

I said, “What about thinking about what you’re saying?”

“You’ve got a smart mouth.”

“Beats a dumb one,” I said, edging even farther away.

When I saw the muscle lines of his jaw clench, I remembered my father’s suggestion: to keep my mouth shut. As it was, Road was silent for quite a while until he said, “What kind of things you like to do?”

“Hanging out with friends. TV. Video games. Music.”

“Guess what? I hate cell phones, and I have no TV. Despise it. Nothing but bad news and ads, telling you what to do. What about sports?”

“I like football.”

“If you want to hurt people, join the army.”

We drove on. I said, “Do you work?”

He snorted. “Live on my Social Security. Veteran’s pension. Used to be a carpenter. Catch an odd job now and then in the neighborhood. I

have one this week. Nothing big. Enough to buy you some food.”

Deciding I seriously didn't like him, I put my eyes on the mountains to the west. They looked like gigantic jagged walls, and I was trapped behind them for a week.

Half an hour later, he said, “Here we are.”

Ogden Street was lined with trees, a fair number of daffodils, and brick houses. Road's house was the smallest—a one-story brick, with a steeply pitched roof and a tall chimney. Looked like a goblin's house.

“Built in the 1920s,” he said. “Back when there was a trolley line on this street.”

“What's a trolley?”

“Huh! Visiting me must be like time travel for you. Trolley is a street railway.”

We walked into the front room, which took up most of the house. One wall was entirely covered with bookcases, stuffed with books. I had never seen so many in a house. A big easy chair. A reading lamp. A fireplace. No logs. Two windows. Over both windows hung more dream

catchers. No pictures on the walls. At the far end of the main room was a small kitchen with a counter and stools. Landline phone on the wall.

There was a side hall, with a small room that led off from it; a bathroom; and up front, a bedroom. On the ceiling of the hallway a recessed square. Hanging down from it was a loop of rope that looked like a noose.

“What’s that for?” I asked, pointing up.

“Pulls down a folding staircase which leads to a storage attic. Full of junk. This is your room,” said Road, indicating the extra room in the back.

It was a small room with pale-green walls. One window—with another dream catcher—a narrow bed, a dresser, and a chair. Another wall of books. I might as well have checked in to a library.

“Was this my dad’s room?”

“It was meant to be, but he took off when I got this place.”

“Took off?”

“Left. Never came back. You a reader?”

“Not really.”

“Your loss. Put your things away while I make lunch.” He walked off.

Knowing I had to juice up my cell phone, I looked for my charger plug. I couldn’t find it, which meant I had left it at home. In other words, I was cut off from all my friends and games.

I sat on the bed and stared at the books. They were mostly histories of the West, cowboys, gold mines, and ranching. I had no idea how I would live through the next seven days. I thought about the noose hanging from the ceiling. Maybe I’d need it.

Road called, “Eats!”

We sat on the stools at the kitchen counter. He still had his Viet cap on. There was a pathetic ham-and-cheese sandwich with white bread on a plate for me. Nothing for him.

“What do you drink? Milk? Coke? Water?”

“Coke.”

“I’ll get some.”

As I ate, he sat opposite, not talking. He was staring at me.

“You look just like Mickey,” he told me for

the second time. Then he said, “Sounds like you two don’t get along.”

“It’s okay.”

Head bent, he studied his hands. With his cap down, I couldn’t see his face. Without looking up, he said, “Does he ever talk about me?”

“No.”

He looked up. “His mother?”

I shook my head.

I thought he might say more, but he didn’t. Instead, he sat there until abruptly, he jumped off his seat, walked toward the front door, wheeled around, yanked off his cap, and in an angry voice, cried out, “I don’t hear from Mickey for years. Then, out of the blue, he calls and tells me his wife is in the hospital and his kid — you — is coming. What kind of crap is that?”

Stunned by his anger, I said, “Do — do you want me to leave?”

“Your ticket is for next Sunday.”

“I — I could change it.”

“Trust me, I checked. It costs too much. I don’t have the money. You’re here until Sunday. I have a patio. I’ll be out there.”

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