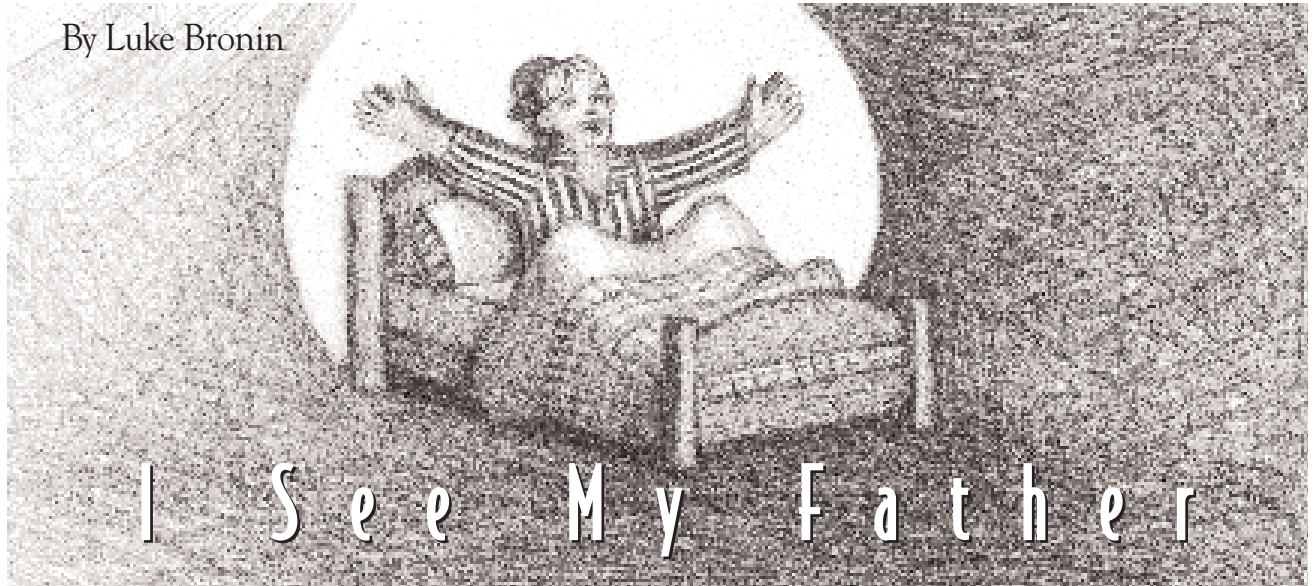


By Luke Bronin



I see my father.

I see him, curly-haired, bearded, crazy, typing in a basement studio on the West Side with no windows. I see crusted coffee cups. I hear him crumpling draft after draft, creating raccoon characters, writing about football players to get his name before the publishers, so that when he really wrote his mind, they'd read it. I see him with earplugs in his ears to dull the music from the small theater next door.

I see him younger, my age, crew cut and round-rimmed glasses crooked on his hook nose, reading Dostoyevsky, Homer, then closing the books and trying to emulate their writing—comparing his words to theirs, examining why theirs were perfect and his weak. I see him turning and sweating at night, burning to cast his imagination beyond him in perfect words.

I see him now. A physician, a father. I see his home, my home—three acres, a pond out back, gas-lit fireplaces, three dogs in the kitchen or pooping on the Oriental rugs. I see his books upstairs—the children's books he wrote before I was born, before my mother, before medical school. I see the hard, yellow cover of *Gus and Buster Work Things Out* fading pale and old. I see the histories he wrote on the Great Depression and the Gold Rush of 1849, the inserts getting soft and torn at the edges. I see him sitting on the living room couch, leaning forward, glasses still crooked, reading *The Odyssey*.

I see my mother.

I see her in a hot apartment in Alphabet City. I see her easel in the corner, a palette of drying grays and reds. I see brushes in the sink and canvases—some insane with shape and color, some blank and waiting—leaning against the walls. I see jeans, crusted with paint, draped over the metal frame of the bed. I

see my mother lying on the bed, the lights off, shadows on the cream walls, her long, straight, brown hair beneath her head. I see her wide-eyed, waiting for her masterpiece.

I see my mother at Hunter, an art major studying Klee, Matisse, Gauguin. I see her trying to recreate their styles, finding their colors too bright, their mood too light, and leaning toward an even darker version of Picasso's blue period.

I've never seen my mother's paintings, the ones she did when she was young and beautiful and mad in New York. She kept them for a long time in her small studio off the garage, but I never knew they were there. And then they burned in the fire. I asked her why she had never shown them to me. She said that she didn't like to look at them. They were troubled; they were made when her mind scared her. She said she had wanted to wait until I was older.

I see my mother as she is now. At her computer desk, bills and books and files on the table, the business manager for my dad's practice. I see her walking the dogs, the King Charles spaniels, down the road and back, giving them a biscuit when they come inside. I see the eagle in the garage, half-trapped in sandstone, that she began when I was eleven or twelve but never finished. And I see the unfinished painting in the pantry, the painting of the dogs on a chair in friendly doggie colors.

When I was younger, my father read me to sleep every night. He would sit next to me on the bed, his knees bent, a book resting on his thighs. When I was very young, he read to me the Brer Rabbit tales, the "Story of Ping," *Peter Rabbit*. Sometimes



he read me one of his own children's books, *Gus and Buster*, or *I Know a Football Player*. When I was five or six, he read to me to sleep with *The Odyssey*. I held his hand when the Cyclops dashed Odysseus's companions on the cave floor. I drifted off while Odysseus wept on Calypso's island, weeping for his wife, his son, his home. My father read to me about Jason and the Golden Fleece, about Hercules and his Labors. He read to me about Aegeus, casting himself into the sea when he supposed the death of his son. At the coming of spring, and again at the beginning of winter, he read to me about Persephone and the six pomegranate seeds, about her mother's love.

When I was in fourth grade, I fell asleep, quickly, to *Plutarch's Lives*, Caesar and Alexander, Cicero and Demosthenes, Romulus and Theseus. My father read to me about men who created empires, men who conquered with their words and founded cities and civilizations. I fell asleep wondering if my words, or my deeds, would live beyond me.

My mother made me costumes whenever I wanted to put clothes on my imagination. I remember riding behind her on a bicycle to nursery school, holding up my long, stuffed, green, spiked dragon's tail so that it wouldn't get caught in the spokes. The snout, orange and red flames shooting from the nose, slid down low over my eyes. And when I entered my American Revolutionary phase, she cut me britches, stitched a blouse with ruffles in the front like Johnny Tremain's, made a leather vest and a yarn queue. I would stand

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guard in front  
of my house

with the musket that was a foot taller than me. I'd hide behind the woodpile and fire at the Redcoats as they marched toward the armory at Concord. She painted my face when I was an Indian—brave streaks of red, black, and yellow.

She tried to teach me to paint. I remember her sitting at the kitchen table with me, taking my hand and guiding my brush to form the shape of an owl like the one the man had brought to my kindergarten class. I remember her showing me how to make stones in a watercolor landscape when I was nine—pressing softly with the edge of a blade and sweeping the paint away

to leave the dull, light stones.

My mother told me that if I wanted to be a good painter, I had to practice. No one gets it right at the beginning. Sometimes people who practice and paint their whole lives never quite get it. But I didn't care. I didn't need to paint.

But I did eventually find something I thought I *did* need.

In the second-floor auditorium of the Rye Arts Center, I heard applause. It was my parents' applause, Dr. and Mrs. Bronin, smiling and clapping for their son Luke, Sky Masterson, who wore a fedora and a yellow carnation, who shot craps and ended the Musical Review on his knees singing "Luck Be A Lady." The other parents clapped, too—they even stood up from their red plastic chairs. Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher congratulated me. Mrs. Costigan gave me a kiss on the cheek. It was parents' applause, but it made me dizzy and made my eyes go wide and my chest tighten and bulge. I couldn't fall asleep that night; my dad's reading didn't help. When my parents left the room, I sat up and belted Broadway songs at my ceiling.

The next fall, fifth grade, I played in another production with the Rye Arts Center. It was a ridiculous musical—*Planet Yuk*—written by the Arts Center's director, Bertin Rowser. My mother did the makeup and most of the costumes. I stood on the stage, Police Sergeant Yuk, half my face painted blue, my hair moussed and colored, and sang "Book 'Em," holding the last note for twenty-three seconds, my fist in the air. And I heard the applause, the thunderous response of my town, of my peers.

I had discovered what I was made for: I was made to sing "five-foot-two, eyes of blue" in a tuxedo with sixth-grade flappers hanging on my arms. I was made to swivel my hips and comb greased hair and dance atop painted plywood cars. I was made for quick costume changes in the wings. To sweat under stage lights. To get dizzy and to have my eyes grow wide and my chest tighten and bulge.

So my mother began to drive me into New York. At first, she drove me to the Weist-Barron School of Acting, where black-and-white glossies of the school's successes were plastered all over the lobby; where I stood in the bright white rooms with my class of future stars and learned how to cry for the camera, how to feel the snow and the wind and the cold. I must admit that most of the time I felt nothing. She drove me there twice a week for two or three months. Then for a week she drove me to see agents. I waited in of-

fices with more black-and-white success photos. I carried my resumé—a list of suburban children’s theater productions and the Weist-Barron classes. And then she drove me to the auditions—peanut butter commercials (“With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good!”), movies, Nickelodeon, soaps, pilots, Broadway. I was prepared for rejection; I knew that it was a hard

awake at night, that I was made for Broadway or the Big Screen. I would make it or die trying.

In the meantime, however, it was good that I was ready for rejection. I got no commercials, movies, Nickelodeon, soaps, pilots, or Broadway; callbacks and close calls a few times, a voice-over for a documentary once, but no shows.

## I discovered what I was made for: To sweat under stage lights. To get dizzy and to have my eyes grow wide and my chest tighten and bulge at their applause.

business. I’d seen *A Chorus Line* and *Gypsy*. But I knew that my break would come and I’d be wide-eyed and dizzy and blow the world away. I knew, lying

Finally, after eight or nine months of wan smiles and thank-you’s and we’ll-be-in-touch’s, I got a part—the child lead in *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*. It was a tiny theater, about as far off-Broadway as you can get and still have a 212 area code, a theater probably like the one my dad heard through the walls of his windowless basement apartment. The show would open in October with productions every night and was expected to run for three months. That meant an hour-long commute every day after school. It meant late nights and no sports and few friends. My parents said that I could accept the role. If I needed to act—and I had said that I needed to act—I would have to sacrifice everything else. And they would sacrifice their time for me.

I ended up not taking the part. For a year I had lain awake and wished for a part, any part. I had wished for the makeup and the lights and the costumes and for the chance to bring a character to life. I knew that I would have to start small, that I’d have to prove myself with a mute part in a peanut butter commercial or in a small underground theater playing *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All*. But in sixth grade, I wasn’t ready to give up my schoolday world of backpacks and birthday parties and weekends. I wanted to act, but I couldn’t live on the stage alone. So I declined the part and went to sleep.

I kept acting at school. I still got dizzy and my chest still tightened and bulged. But I stopped auditioning. I stopped dreaming of bright lights and Broadway.

When I declined the part and stopped auditioning, I caught a glimpse of my father and mother, although I didn’t recognize them then. I didn’t recognize them until a year ago, when my father finally answered my old question of why he stopped writing.

He told me about his basement apartment with the coffee cups and the typewriter. He told me how he would sometimes stay up all night writing on a week-night, push himself through his work, go home and tear up what he had written the night before because it wasn’t right. He told how he tried to mimic great

### Fear of Bears

Well, I once was scared of the big brown bear,  
but I’m grown up, and I’m not scared  
of anything  
anymore.

But that’s a poor excuse for a lie  
and I’ll tell you why:  
When I was three I used to pee  
in my bed and bath respectively,  
to the chagrin of my parents and my kin.  
My mother seemed to think  
if I slept in the sink  
then my pee would harmlessly run down the drain.  
It was a strain on my kin—  
yes I’m guilty of that sin—  
but I’d just let loose within a water-falling dream  
that seemed so real.  
Anyway, those days have passed away, I think,  
but I still get a little  
nervous around that sink.

Now I’m scared of catching a terrible disease  
and dying a horrible death  
with intolerable breath  
that I will breathe  
all over  
you.

—Aaron Edwards,  
*Twelfth grade, Middletown High School,  
Middletown, Connecticut*



writers when he was in high school. He had burned to create words that would live beyond his life.

But he realized, somewhere in his twenties during a sleepless night when his body collapsed but caffeine kept his mind awake and crazy, that he couldn't be satisfied by writing alone. He wanted a wife, a child. He wanted to give his wife and child what his broken family and gambling father couldn't give him. A real artist, my father said, needs to create his art. My father loved his art, but he needed more. He needed a family. If he had to choose—and the grimy sink and unpaid bills in the apartment suggested that he did—he could live, and he could sleep at night, without writing. But a real artist, he said, has no choice but to create.

So today he is a dermatologist. He has his house in Connecticut and his three dogs, a wife, a son. He writes a weekly column for the local newspaper, a medical column, but it's not the writing he once tossed and turned for. He sits on his couch in front of the fire and reads *The Odyssey*. Years ago, he read his boy to sleep each night. My father may still dream of casting his imagination beyond him in perfect words, but he can fall asleep without writing. He chose a family and a home and dogs and a fireplace over his dream of writing, and he would make the same choice again.

Sometimes I wonder what might have happened had I made a different choice and taken the part in *Sister Mary Ignatius* and stuck with acting. But fantasies of fame and glory aside, I know that I really wasn't made to act. I know because, like my father and mother, I had a choice.

Lying in my bed now, the same age as my father when he wore his round-rimmed glasses and poured over pages of Dostoyevsky and Homer, a new desire keeps me awake and a new dream consumes my sleep. Lying in bed and staring through the dark at the dim record covers that paper my wall, my mind dances. I turn phrases and melodies over and over in my head. My hands finger chords in the air. I wait to write melodies that stick in people's heads and won't budge, to write words, simple and clean, that everyone has felt but never said quite right. I wait to find the common chords that everybody knows but few can voice. I want people to listen to my voice and believe that I am singing to them alone. My eyes stay wide, and I wait for the one song that will carry my voice and my chords beyond my life.

But as badly as I want to write that song, I sometimes lie awake and wonder if I really need to. I wonder if a few years from now, during a sleepless night when my body has collapsed but caffeine keeps my

mind awake and crazy, I will realize that music is not enough. I will look at the grimy countertop and the unpaid bills, inevitable for any artist (at least at first), and I will make a choice. I will choose to make a life for a wife and child. I will choose to put my guitar and my scattered pages of lyrics in a small room off the garage.

My greatest fear is that I will be able to make that choice, that I will die without writing my one true song, that I will find I am not a true artist.

But sometimes, I think that if twenty years from now I can sit on my son's bed and sing my boy to sleep, it will be enough. ★

## The Fire Escape

Heat hung  
like damp stockings  
over the taut wire of  
the neighborhood  
upon which we balanced  
and let the heaving warmth  
drop into our lungs.  
Long, dewy  
freshly-shaven limbs  
sassily propped against  
the grainy edge  
of a building's roof,  
scorched tarpaper  
sanding down the  
edges of the sun.  
Surfaces turned to  
bisque in the blurry air  
of this fiery kiln,  
our grandmothers below  
feeding pigeons  
beneath the cheap shade  
of nylon umbrellas.  
You, looking for a soda,  
me, saturated with the  
crisp aroma of  
boys on bicycles,  
rubber wheels broiling  
on crumbling asphalt.  
It was too hot  
to speak, so we  
watched the radiant city,  
like watching a cake  
rise, from the  
fire escape.

—Michelle Chen,  
Tenth grade, Bronx High School of Science,  
Bronx, New York

