

was three months away from high school graduation, on the cusp of independence, and speculating, as high school seniors often do, that my future would hold nothing but failure and sin. Then, during one evening that March, without prompting, I called Mr. Decker, the owner of a local truck line, and asked him if I could have a job washing trucks, nothing better. He told me to just punch in, anytime.

So I showed up at Decker Truck Line the next Saturday around nine, wearing my father's old work boots, the ones he wore when he shoveled by-products at the Hormel Plant; a job that, as he proudly recalls, left bleeding sores on his hands. I punched in and walked through the huge garage, tracking in snow and dirt, nodding hello to all the mechanics and drivers, breathing cold mist. I walked up a few cement steps into a small, darker garage where the walls smelled mossy, and the long rubber hoses lay around like dead bull snakes on Highway 20, brown and flat and wet. I grabbed two cream-colored buckets, filled them with hot water from the rusty water spout, and added a squeeze or two of soap.

In memory I see my silhouette, dark against the bright light in the open garage door, boyishly thin, kneeling while the steam from the buckets warms my face from the March morning. In that pose I'm feeling, somewhere near the small of my back, that I have arrived, finally, to work. Did I recall, at that quiet moment, all those men, all those workers that haunted the winters of my childhood? Did the soapsuds in the buckets smell like so many old lemon rinds, sucked dry and scattered on the front seat of my grandfather's truck? However it really was then, I see this now: I am scrubbing the trucks furiously, washing the grime from the white metal, pausing to watch it slide down, slowly, in a gray stream, over the tires, along the cement, and, finally, into the drain as if it carries along with it all my future transgressions.

BRADY UDALL

One Liar's Beginnings

Before all else, let me make my confession: I am a liar. For me, admitting to being a liar is just about the most difficult confession I could make; as a rule, liars don't like to admit to anything. But I'm trying to figure out how I came to be this way—what influences, what decisions at what forked roads have led me to be the devious soul I am today. And as any clergyman worth a nickel can tell you, before you can discover the truth about yourself, first you must confess.

I can't say I remember the first lie I ever told. It's been so long, and there have been so many lies in between. But I can only believe that my first steps, first day of school, first kiss—all those many firsts we love to get so nostalgic about—none of them was in any way as momentous as that first lie I ever told.

It's a dusty summer day. I am three years old, and in the Udall household there is going to be hell to pay; some fool has

gone and eaten all the cinnamon red-hots my mother was going to use to decorate cupcakes for a funeral luncheon.

Down in the basement, I am bumping the back of my head against the cushion of the couch. This peculiar habit, *head-bouncing* we called it in our house, was something I liked to do whenever I was nervous or bored. I was most satisfied with the world when I could sit on that couch and bounce my head against the back cushion—you know, really get up a good rhythm, maybe a little Woody Woodpecker on the TV—and not have anyone bother me about it. Along with worrying that their son might be retarded on some level, my parents also became concerned about the living room couch—all this manic head-bouncing of mine was wearing a considerable divot in the middle cushion (my preferred section) right down to the foam. So my father, after trying all he could think of to get me to desist, finally threw up his hands and went to the town dump and came back with a prehistoric shaggy brown couch that smelled like coconut suntan oil. He put it down in the basement, out of sight of friends and neighbors, and I was allowed to head-bounce away to my heart's content.

So there I am down on the couch, really going at it, while my mother stomps around up above. She is looking for the red-hots thief, and she is furious. My mother is beautiful, ever-smiling and refined, but when she is angry she could strike fear into the heart of a werewolf.

As for me, I am thoroughly terrified, though not too terrified to enjoy the last of the red-hots. I put them in my mouth and keep them there until they turn into a warm, red syrup that I roll around on my tongue.

My mother is yelling out all the kids' names: *Travis! Symonie! Brady! Cord!* But none of us is dumb enough to answer. Finally, she stomps down the steps and sees me there on my couch, bobbing back and forth like the peg on a

metronome, trying not to look her way, hoping that if I can keep my eyes off her long enough she just might disappear.

"Brady, did you eat those red-hots?" she asks, her mouth set hard. I begin to bounce harder.

"Hmmm?" I say.

"Did you eat them?"

I imagine for a second what my punishment will be—maybe spending the rest of the afternoon cooped up in my room, maybe being forced to watch while the rest of the family hogs down the leftover cupcakes after dinner—or maybe she will have mercy on me and opt for a simple swat on the butt with a spatula.

"Did you eat them?"

I don't really think about it, don't even know where it comes from—I look my mother straight in the eye, say it loud and clear as you please: "No."

She doesn't press me, just takes my answer for what it is. Why would she suspect anything from me, a baby who's never lied before, innocent as can be, a sweet little angel who doesn't know any better than to spend all his free time banging his head against the back cushion of a couch from the dump.

"All right," she says, smiling just a little now. She can't help herself—I am that innocent and cute. "Why don't you come upstairs and have a cupcake?"

Right then I stop bouncing altogether. It feels as if there is light blooming in my head, filling me up, giving me a sensation I've never had before, a feeling of potency and possibility and dominion. With a word as simple as "no" I can make things different altogether; no, it wasn't me who ate those red-hots; no, it's not me who deserves a swat on the butt or no cartoons for the rest of the afternoon. What I deserve is a cupcake.

It's a wonderful epiphany: with a lie I can change reality; with a lie I can change the world.

know why, but I could tell him. I could tell him it is not being loved and touched as a child, a cold mother and cold father and little food for so many years—lost youth. These are his problems, I could tell him, but don't.

My mother is at home, sewing brass buttons onto her hand-knit cardigan. The television is on, but she is not surprised. She has enough sense to know anyone that good, that groomed, is bound to die in office. She doesn't cry, but lets out a long, dry wail and is fine. She needs a friend. Everyone is gone. She has given up her life. She irons, reads, cleans, gets ready to have a baby. What is a national tragedy to her when she has already lost it all?

When I do finally spring to life, after James, there are only three of us at home: boy, girl, mom. I learn to think of father as absent, invisible. I learn to take care of my mother, who is really just a girl. I learn to be quiet so she doesn't yell. At age four, I tell my mother that I can get a job so there is more money. At age six, I learn to walk in my shoes carefully so they don't wear out. I learn to misunderstand men at age ten when I see James getting a BB gun when there is supposedly no money for me to join Junior Great Books Club.

My father sails in and out. He dances drunk and lets James and me hang on his flexed biceps when he's in the mood. Take a picture of me and the kids like this! he shouts at my mother, then throws up. And my mother . . . my mother. I see it happening, I know it will happen, I try to warn her. She does not leave him when everything screams *leave*. She's in it for the kids, she tries to believe and stand by. I am unfortunately old enough to grasp it all.

Before I was born, I knew this would happen.

ANNE CARSON

Very Narrow

Water is best.

—PINDAR

Memory is of the past.

—ARISTOTLE

No that's not her.

—MY FATHER

Surely the world is full of simple truths that can be obtained by asking clear questions and noting the answers. "Who is that woman?" I overheard my father ask my mother one night when I was coming down the stairs to the kitchen. It took me a moment to realize he was asking about me—not because I did not know by then that he was losing his mind, which was obvious in other ways, but because he used the word *woman*.

I was not "woman" to him. I stopped halfway down the

stairs. It reminded me of a night when I was twelve or thirteen. Coming down the same stairs, I heard him in the kitchen talking to my mother. "Oh, she won't be like them," he was saying with a sort of glow in his voice. It was the last time I heard that glow. Because soon afterward I did, to my dismay, begin to be like them—as the Chinese proverb says, "There was blood in the water trough early one morning."

I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely used the word *woman* myself. But such things are the natural facts of what we are, I suppose we have to follow out these signs in the endless struggle against forgetting. The truth is, I lived out my adolescence mainly in default of my father's favor. But I perceived that I could trouble him less if I had no gender. Anger tired him so. I made my body as hard and flat as the armor of Athena. No secrets under my skin, no telltale drops on the threshold. And eventually I found—a discovery due, in fact, to the austerities of pilgrimage—that I could suppress the natural facts of "woman" altogether. I did so. Unfortunately by then his mind was too far gone to care.

I lived alone for a long time.

What happened to me after that takes the form of a love story, not so different from other love stories, except better documented. Love is, as you know, a harrowing event. I believed in taking an anthropological approach to that.

Even now it is hard to admit how love knocked me over. I had lived a life protected from all surprise, now suddenly I was a wheel running downhill, a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch. I was outside my own language and customs. Why, the first time he came to my house he walked straight into the back room and came out and said, "You have a very narrow bed." Just like that! I had to laugh. I hardly knew him. I wanted to say, Where I come from, people don't

talk about beds, except children's or sickbeds. But I didn't. Humans in love are terrible. You see them come hungering at one another like prehistoric wolves, you see something struggling for life in between them like a root or a soul and it flares for a moment, then they smash it. The difference between them smashes the bones out. So delicate the bones. "Yes, it is very narrow," I said. And just at that moment, I felt something running down the inside of my leg. I had not bled for thirteen years.

Love is a story that tells itself—fortunately. I don't like romance and have no talent for lyrical outpourings—yet I found myself during the days of my love affair filling many notebooks with data. There was something I had to explain to myself. I traveled into it like a foreign country, noted its behaviors, transcribed its idioms, prowled like an anthropologist for the rare and unwary use of a kinship term. But kinship itself jumped like a frog leg, then lay silent. I found the kinship between a man and a woman can be a steep, whole, excellent thing and full of languages. Yet it may have no speech. Does that make sense?

One night—it was the first winter my father began to have trouble with his mind—I was sitting at the kitchen table wrapping Christmas presents. I saw him coming down the stairs very slowly, holding his hands in front of him. In his hands were language and speech, decoupled, and when he started to talk, they dropped and ran all over the floor like a bag of bell clappers. "What happened to you to I who to? There was a deer. That's not what I. How many were? No. How? What did you do with the things you dripped no not dripped how? You had an account and one flew off. That's not. No? I. No. How? How?" He sat down all of a sudden on the bottom step and turned his eyes on me, clearly having no idea in the world who I was, or how he came to be there with

me, or what should happen next. I never saw a human being so naked. His face the face of a fledgling bird, in what fringe of infant evening leaves, in what untouched terror lapped.

Sometimes you come to an edge that just breaks off.

The man who named my narrow bed was a quiet person, but he had good questions. "I suppose you do love me, in your way," I said to him one night close to dawn when we lay on the narrow bed. "And how else should I love you—in your way?" he asked. I am still thinking about that.

Man is this and woman is that, men do this and women do different things, woman wants one thing and man wants something else and nobody down the centuries appears to understand how this should work. "Every day he'd come in from the fields and throw his old filthy hat on my clean tablecloth that we're going to eat off—sweatband down!" says my mother, still furious, and he's been gone how long? years now.

JEANNE BRINKMAN GRINNAN

Adjustments

It is the last Sunday in October. Time to set the clocks back to eastern standard time, a task my father always took upon himself. Fussing with the clocks. Fine-tuning them, making them accurate.

My mother stands on a chair, reaching out precariously to wind the clock. I stand next to her, fearful that she'll fall. I know that her do-it-herself nature is two-edged. Why just last week, the wheels on the garbage tote got away from her, pulling her down. She fell, bruising both knees badly. I wish that my worry could protect her in some way.

My mother winds the clock. It is another of the "firsts" we encounter since the death of my father in August. Marking his birthday, changing the oil in the car, closing the cottage for another season. It is a strange lens through which I now view the world. To find my father missing in the happenings of every day.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Parnassus

Technically I was a man.

This spindly squeaky thing with the adam's apple accent was, by virtue of being thirteen and bar mitzvahed, a technical man.

And so the phone call came: they needed a tenth for a minyan. Nathan Kaplan—I remembered Mr. Kaplan, didn't I?—needed to say the *yiskor* prayers for his wife, and if I weren't there in attendance, lending my lame but official singsong to these *daveners*, the God Who Demanded a Threshold of Ten would never turn His Ear of Ears to their puff of plaintive Kaplan imploration.

I didn't *want* to; but I went. I wanted to—what? Watch television? Play with my willie? Stare at a smear of clouds and wish a burning pinpoint of myself up through them, into the currents of outer space? The angsts and overbrim-

mings of being technically a man are many. In any case, yes, I went.

There isn't much more to say. They were ancient and stale of breath, and silked and fringed in the ritual synagogue-wear, and I stood among them, following their lead and saying *amen* whenever someone's gnarled radish of a finger thumped the word out in my opened book. I loaned my voice, it took its place in a single wing of voice that made its technical way through the top of the ionosphere, and into a realm of shimmering off the scale of human perception. This is why I believe in the muses, of course.

There were nine of them.

And ever since, if I've been invited to join them for a moment, to sing along as a tenth—though they may have scraped the bottom of the barrel to get my number, I go.

SINCE KING'S ORDER: "THESE SIGNS MUST BE REMOVED"—till finally, like a return to some opening F-minor chord—8 YEARS COLORADO STARVATION RANCH.

Beyond and behind that lettering, what's the sad upshot? Beats me. To learn more, I'd have to turn aside, wouldn't I, seek out that rancher or one of his neighbors. Impossible. The road's motion won't let me. "On," it says. "Farther." As for Colorado Starvation Ranch, slow adversity can occur only if we stop, settle down. Which is something the road never does.

JONATHAN RABAN

Gulleywasher

I loaded two armfuls of books into the boot of the car and headed south to Baker, where I put up in a motel room furnished with junk from the wilder reaches of the 1950s. The pictures on its walls were all of water: two horseback explorers were in the act of discovering a mountain lake; a pack-horse bridge spanned a river in what looked like Constable country; printed on dark blue velvet, a Japanese sea was in the grip of a *tsunami*. They were pictures for a dry country. At \$23.50 for three beds, a bathroom and a fully equipped kitchen, the room was pleasingly in character with the frugal spirit of the place.

That evening a lightning-storm moved in on Baker from the west. One could see it coming for an hour before it hit: the distant artillery flashes on a sky of deep episcopal purple. As the storm advanced, I sat in a bar on Main Street, reading

the life of Patrick Henry in *Four American Patriots: A Book for Young Americans* by Alma Holman Burton.

'Colonel Washington,' said Mr. Davies, 'is only twenty-three years old. I cannot but hope that Providence has preserved the youth in so signal a manner for some important service to his country.'

'Oh,' thought Patrick, 'George Washington has done so much for his country, and he is only twenty-three.'

The people in the bar were huddled and talkative: living by day in so much space and solitude, they evidently liked to squash up close at night. At the back of the place, two poker tables were in session with the players gossiping unprofessionally between reckless bids of 50¢ a time. The slogan in scabbed paint on the bar door announced, *Liquor Up Front, Poker in the Rear.*

He looked down at his hands. They were brown and rough with toil.

'Alas!' he said, 'I do my best, and yet I cannot even make a living on my little farm!'

This was quite true.

Patrick could not make his crops grow. Then his house caught fire and burned to the ground. It was all very discouraging!

The snippets of bar conversation were, on the whole, more interesting than Alma Holman Burton's prose. A Mexican seated at the table next to me was talking to a scrawny, pencil-moustached, thirtyish type, perched on a swivel-stool at the bar. The Mexican said he was up in Baker from Wilmer, Texas.

"Wilmer?" said the guy at the bar, in a whoop of delighted

recognition. "I know Wilmer! I was in jail in Wilmer. Buy you a drink, man?"

And so, at the age of twenty-three, Patrick Henry, with a wife and little children to provide for, did not have a shilling in his pocket. But his father helped a little and Sarah's father helped a little, and they managed to keep the wolf from the door . . .

. . . which would not have been a dead metaphor to a child in eastern Montana, where wolves picked off the sheep at nights and "wolfers" trapped the animals for bounty.

The thunder was directly overhead, and it was immediately followed by a long kettle-drum tattoo of rain on the roof. The bar went quiet. Everyone in it listened to the rain.

"It's a gulleywasher," the bartender said, gathering in the empties.

The thunder rolled away eastwards, towards North Dakota, but the rain kept coming.

"It's a gulleywasher," said the man who'd done jail-time in Wilmer, as if he had just minted the expression.

A crowd formed at the open doorway of the bar to watch the downpour. The rain fell in gleaming rods. Main Street was a tumbling river, already out of its banks and spilling over onto the sidewalk. Its greasy waters were colored red, white, and blue by the neon signs in the bar window. A truck sloshed past at crawling speed, throwing up a wake that broke against the doors of darkened stores.

"That," said a turnip-faced old brute in a Stetson, speaking in the voice of long and hard experience, "is a gulleywasher."

People craned to see. A couple had brought their toddler along (this was an easygoing bar in an easygoing town); the man lifted her on to his shoulders to give her a grandstand view of the wonder. The rain made everyone young; people

dropped their guard in its presence, and the pleasure in their faces was as empty of self-consciousness as that of the toddler, who bounced against her father's neck, saying, "Water. Water. Water." Some shook their heads slowly from side to side, their faces possessed by the same aimless smile. Some whistled softly through their teeth. A woman laughed; a low cigarette-stoked laugh that sounded uncannily like the hiss and crackle of the rain itself.

It went on raining. It was still raining when I drove back to the motel, where the forecourt was awash and the kitchen carpet blackly sodden. I sat up listening to it; attuned now to what I ought to hear. When rain falls in these parts, in what used to be known as the Great American Desert, it falls with the weight of an astonishing gift. It falls like money.

JOHN T. PRICE

Good Workers

To work, my grandfather said, was to work. To play was to play. And he meant to *work*—digging ditches, shoveling shit for pennies until the flesh on your hands peeled back in red strips. When I was just a teen he told me about those bloody hands with a serious, unfeeling pride that seemed awesome to me, a boy in school, the son of a lawyer.

When I was even younger, maybe four, my grandfather would drive me down to the Gas and Electric Service Garage where he worked, and while there he would let me honk the horns on all the bright yellow company trucks. The way I remember it, it is always winter, and my grandfather picks me up around dusk when the horizon holds a strip of azure beneath the blackness. A few strings of Christmas lights, red and green, linger on this house or that. The cabin of my grandfather's truck is warm, and the crunching snow sounds

IN BRIEF

BY JUDITH KITCHEN

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POEMS

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SHORT TAKES ON

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EDITED BY

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