

PETER LEVINE

Gravel

AND THERE, SITTING ON A BENCH, WAS NOT MY FATHER; only as I passed by him, I smelled my father. This man was wearing the cologne my father wore many years ago. The cologne was called Gravel. It came in a square jar and it had little rocks in it. This was in the 1980s. I was still a kid, and liked very much watching him put on his cologne. Because I was a little kid—I figured that this was normal, for cologne to have rocks in it. Jesus—what a gimmick. I'd watch him getting ready in the evening to go out with my mother. I would hold his cufflinks. He was always a very well-dressed man. He said the heart of a man was reflected in what he wore. He gave me that bottle of cologne shortly after he bought it, having used it perhaps only several times. I had no use for it, other than the little rocks inside it. He knew I loved it.

It was late spring when I was walking down the street and smelled the man who wore my father's cologne—a cologne twenty years out of style. The man wearing my father's cologne did not *look* like my father, except that he had dark hair. He was a heavy, swarthy man talking on a phone and smiling. My father had been a slim, clean man from Long Island, the child of two academics, former communists, secular Jews both (my parents the same). He was a lawyer (my mother was one as well) and had done very well and then he had died in a boating accident in Chicago, where I had grown up, in the summer of my junior year at college.

I cannot say that I thought of him all the time—every day, for example, when I woke up. Nor can I say that I never thought about him at all. It was in-between. I did not feel particularly sad when I would think of him, say, when I would play tennis, a sport which he taught me. I suppose I felt nostalgic. This was very normal, I figured.

People die. A certain number of men can expect heart attacks, some can expect prostate cancer, some colon cancer, some skin cancer from days outside, playing golf. Some go over boats, get hit by the outboard motor's blades in the belly of Lake Michigan, fall for no reason at all.

I was on my way to dinner at my girlfriend's home—a woman thirteen years older than me, a divorcée with a young son named Blaine. No one approved of this relationship, and that, I suppose, is part of the reason I loved it so.

Included in the reasons none of this made sense were the following: This woman, Kathleen, was, as I have mentioned, thirteen years older than me, which put her at forty-three. She was divorced—not a bad thing in and of itself, but the man she had been married to was an awful drunk and then a suicide—a subject she didn't discuss and I made sure not to ask about. She was old-moneyed Irish Catholic. She had a child; she had a child named Blaine. He was fifteen and already getting into trouble for smoking cigarettes at the private school she sent him to. Picayune stuff, but still, Blaine was on a fast track to military school, all was pointing in that direction. Kathleen liked to drink martinis after work (she was a public relations executive), though, again, she came from money and didn't really need the work to begin with. They belonged to a country club that did not allow admittance to blacks and Jews. On weekends she might wear Kelly green polo shirts and checked shorts. She had taken riding lessons when she was a girl, and even had ridiculous photos of her on a horse named Lord.

It was an outrage. She had named her child Blaine. *Blaine*.

And while my mother was overly critical of the women I dated (not uncommon, of course) and protective of me, my father never cared about who I dated. He would always say there was so much else to worry about—though he never seemed to be a man particularly burdened with worry, preoccupied the way some men are with work, debt, sports, money. He was a quiet, thoughtful man. He had a beard which, at the time he died, was turning itself white.

In truth, there wasn't much to get worked up over in regards to Kathleen and me. We had met at a nice bar, I asked her out, we went out, slept together, and because I lived not far from her, it was a convenient relationship. After her husband, she had no intention of getting remarried. Plus, I was so much younger. She had a son. We were companions—that was all. It was nice.

To her house, on that evening I smelled what I thought, for a second, was my father, I brought a bottle of white wine. She had a big deck off the kitchen and a big yard and on this we would eat. What I wore: a Kiton suit, a Borelli shirt, Mont Blanc cufflinks and Mont Blanc watch. Sharp.

Kathleen lived in the north of the city, which was disguised as a suburb. These were all 150-year-old brick homes, massive things with three- and four-car

garages, some with swimming pools, some with tennis courts, many with hidden passages in their libraries, surrounded each by maple and elm trees. The foliage was dense enough that you couldn't see in a neighbor's yard and that was the way they liked it. My mother, when I told her this, seemed to suggest that those sorts of people had secrets to keep from each other. I told her she was being ridiculous. I asked what people? And what secrets?

Our evenings usually involved dinner and then love-making (if Blaine was out). I rarely stayed over, unless Blaine was going away for the weekend. He seemed to be losing friends, anyhow, did not fit in at all with the kids whom Kathleen would have wanted him to fit in with, and for some reason, did not quite fit in with the kids he would have liked to have fit in with—kids who were getting an early start on drugs and booze, who did not play sports, did not engage in any worthwhile extracurricular activities, just hung out and wasted the afternoons.

I CAME AROUND THE WOOD FENCE and found Kathleen setting up the table on the deck. Down below, Blaine was fooling around with a tether ball his father had put up, presumably when he was a young boy. It was a green evening. Kathleen had placed Citronella candles on the table. I saw that she had set three place settings. I kissed her. Her face was tight and very pretty. She was tanned. Blaine watched this from the back of the yard, as if that was where he slept and lived—a little troll who resided in the forest and who Kathleen and her husband had taken in the way one might feed a cat.

Blaine was nearly as tall as me, but in all other ways he was just a child. He might become a handsome man—it was possible to see—once his voice dropped, his shoulders cut out the way they ought to, his legs filled up, and he began shaving regularly. As it was now, his face was sort of too big for his skinny body. He had black hair which was dirty-looking and needed cutting.

I waved at him. He looked down and waved back. He was the type of kid who had manners, but hated to use them, and did so only out of habit, one he was working hard to get rid of. He called me sir, sometimes. This made me feel strange. I was almost closer in age to him than I was his mother. Sometimes, in spite of what I wore, what I did for work (a consultant), I felt like I had more in common with old Blaine than I did his mother. I knew this woman – I knew all about her. Sex, for example. I knew her likes and dislikes. It was hard not to think of this in his company.

“He’s joining us?” I said.

“Yeah. His friends didn’t call him. He was supposed to go to the movies.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Is that all right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, even though it was not all right and it would probably ruin the evening, and make the whole thing not worth the while.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like help. Do you want me to finish setting the table?”

“Oh, no no. But would you mind going to talk to him for a minute? I think he’s really upset about all this.”

“Of course.”

I had never really said much to Blaine, though, other than a few awkward *hello’s* and *how-is-school*.

She gave me a kiss. She pulled me in close when she did it.

I walked down from the deck and out into the backyard, all the way down to where Blaine was knocking this tether ball around. He saw me coming. He was a terrible athlete. It was sort of pathetic. I had been a very good athlete—had played tennis in college, my father had taught me everything he had known, and then I had taught him a few things. I was fifteen myself when I started to beat him. He didn’t get mad about it, either. That was a summer day, and we were keeping score, and the first set was close, but the second set I pulled away entirely, and after that, he never beat me again in his life. He raised his hands up and said he was going to have to take me and my mother out to dinner. It was cause to celebrate. He said congratulations. He said good job, Pal. He liked to call me Pal, my father. He might have been very angry about the whole thing. Some men would be, I know.

“Hi Blaine.”

“Hey,” he said, not looking at me. He was taking the ball and swinging it around violently, but didn’t have the coordination to hit it again as it came around.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Oh,” I said.

This whole thing was very silly. Very silly of Kathleen to think this would be a good idea. I was sleeping with her. Blaine knew it. I was a kid myself, in many ways.

“How’s school?”

End of excerpt. For the full text, please see our print issue.