

My Father Was a Writer

A MEMOIR

BY ANDRE DUBUS III

IT WAS THE SIX of us: my young parents and all four of us kids born in a five-year period beginning in 1958. We were each born on Marine bases, delivered by Marine doctors, Suzanne at Quantico in Virginia, me and Jeb at Camp Pendleton in California, and Nicole on Whidbey Island in Washington State. During these years, our father spent a lot of time aboard the USS *Ranger* off the coast of Japan. When we did see him, it was for brief stretches in cramped Marine-base housing. His head was shaved, his face smooth and clean, but he was a man who didn't smile much, a man who seemed locked into a car on a road he didn't want to be on. But then my father's father died in 1963, and almost immediately after that Dad retired from the Marines as a captain and was accepted into the Iowa Writers' Workshop in Iowa City.

Though I didn't have words for it, I'd never seen him happier; he laughed often and loudly; he hugged and kissed our mother at every turn; he'd let his hair grow out long enough you could actually see some on his head, thick and brown. He'd grown a mustache, too. At night before bed, he'd sit me, my brother, and two sisters down at the kitchen table or on the couch in the living room and he'd tell us stories he made up himself—adventure stories where the hero and heroine were Indians defending their families and their people from the white man. One of them was Running Blue Ice Water, a kind and brave warrior who lingered in my imagination long after we'd been tucked in upstairs in a large room all four of us children shared.

My memory of that time is the memory of parties, though we were so broke we ate canned meat and big blocks of government cheese. Once a month Pop sold blood. But the parties went on. They happened at night, the house filled with talk and laughter and cigarette smoke. There were parties during the day, too. Blankets laid out on grass under the sun. Men and women eating sandwiches and sipping wine and reading poems out loud to each other.

Some parties were at the Vonneguts' house next door. All the Vonnegut kids were older than we were, but the father, Kurt, would walk down to our house every afternoon and sit with us four kids in the living room and watch *Batman* on the small black-and-white. He smoked one cigarette after the other. He laughed a lot and made jokes, and once he squinted down at me through the smoke and said: "Who's your favorite bad guy?"

"Um, False Face."

He smiled, his face a warm mix of mustache and round eyes and curly hair. "I like the Riddler."

IN OUR BEDROOM floor was an air vent that overlooked the living room, and sometimes on party nights we kids would huddle around it and spy on our mother and father and their friends below, watch them dance and drink and argue and laugh, the men always louder than the women, their cigarette smoke curling up through the grate into our faces. I remember hearing a lot of dirty words then but also ones like *story*, *novel*, and *poem*. *Hemingway* and *Chekhov*.

In the morning we'd be up long before our parents. We'd get cereal and poke around in the party ruins, the table and floors of our small house littered with empty beer bottles, crushed potato chips, overflowing ashtrays, half the butts brushed with lipstick. If there was anything left in a glass, and if there wasn't a cigarette floating in it, Suzanne and I would take a few sips because we liked the taste of watered-down whiskey or gin. Once we found a carrot cake in the living room. Its sides were covered with white frosting, but the middle was nothing but a mashed crater. I remembered the cake from the night before, a mouthwatering three-layer with frosted writing on the top. I asked my mother who it was for and she said it was for one of their friends who'd just sold his novel to a publisher; they were going to celebrate. And now the cake was unrecognizable, and when my mother came down that morning looking young and beautiful, probably in shorts and one of my father's shirts, smoking a cigarette, only twenty-five or -six, I asked her what had happened to the cake. She dug her finger into the frosting, then smiled at me. "Just your

father and his crazy writer friends, honey.” Did that mean he was a crazy writer, too? I wasn’t sure.

It was another party at our house that confirmed it for me, though, one that began with jazz on the record player, a platter of cucumbers and carrots and horseradish dip on the kitchen table, glasses set out on the counter, and in his front room on his black wooden desk were two lit candles on either side of something rectangular and about two or three inches high covered with a black cloth. As my father’s friends showed up one or two couples at a time, he’d walk them into his room with a drink or bottle of beer in his hand, and he’d point at what he told them was the failed novel he was holding a funeral for. He’d laugh and they’d laugh and one of his writer friends put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed, both of them looking suddenly pained and quite serious. I knew then my father was a writer, too.

WHEN OUR FATHER’S book was published in 1967, he got a job teaching at a small college in Massachusetts. We loaded up our rusted Chevrolet and drove east. For a year we lived in the woods of southern New Hampshire in a rented clapboard house on acres of pine and pasture. We had a swimming pool and a herd of sheep. There were fallen pine needles and a brook along whose banks Jeb and I found arrowheads, smooth pebbles, the bleached bones of rabbits or squirrels. We felt rich; we had all that land to play on, we had that big old house—its dark inviting rooms, its fireplaces, its fading wallpaper and floorboards fastened with square-cut nails from before the Civil War; we had that *pool*.

In 1968 we moved again, this time to a cottage on a pond on the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border. I was nine, and so it seemed like a house, but it was really a summer camp. Downstairs was the kitchen and its worn linoleum floor, the small living room with the black-and-white TV where we heard of the killing of Martin Luther King Jr.; it’s where we saw X-ray photos of Robert Kennedy’s brain and the .22-caliber bullet shot into it; it’s where the following summer we watched a man walk on the moon, my mother sitting on the arm of the couch in shorts and one of Pop’s button-down shirts, saying, “We’re on the moon, you guys. We’re on the fucking *moon*.”

My father, thirty-two years old then, was earning seven thousand dollars a year teaching. He had a brown beard he kept trimmed, and he ran five miles a day, a ritual he had begun in the Marine Corps a few years earlier. My mother and father rarely had money to go out to a restaurant, but they still hosted a lot of parties at our house, usually on Friday or Saturday nights, sometimes both; my mother would set out saltine crackers and dip, sliced cheese and cucumbers and carrots; they'd open a jug of wine and put out a bucket of ice and wait for their friends to bring the rest: more wine, beer, bottles of gin and bourbon. Most of their friends came from the college where Pop taught: there was an art professor, a big man who wore black and had a clean-shaven handsome face and laughed loudly and looked to me like a movie actor; there were bearded poets and bald painters and women who taught pottery or literature or dance. There were students, too, mainly women, all of them beautiful, as I recall, with long shiny hair and straight white teeth, and they dressed in sleeveless sweaters or turtlenecks and didn't wear bras, their bell-bottoms hugging their thighs and flaring out widely over their suede boots.

The house would be filled with talk and laughter, jazz playing on the record player—a lot of Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan, and Buddy Rich. From my bed upstairs I could smell pot and cigarette smoke. I could hear music and the animated voices of my mother and father and their loud, intriguing friends. Sometimes there'd be yelling, and there'd be words like *Saigon*, *Viet Cong*, and *motherfucking Nixon*.

One weeknight on the news, there was a story about Marines killed in battle. I was lying on the floor under the coffee table as the camera panned over the bodies of soldiers lying on the ground, most of them on their stomachs, their arms splayed out beside them. Pop sat straight on the couch. His hands were on his knees, and his eyes were shining. "Pat, those are boys. Oh, goddamnit, those are eighteen-year-old *boys*."

Later, sleeping in the bed beside my brother's, there was a weight on my chest and I woke to my father holding me, crying into the pillow beside my ear. "My son, my son, oh, my son." He smelled like bourbon and sweat. It was hard to breathe. I couldn't pull my arms free of the

blankets to hug Pop back. Then he was off me, crying over Jeb on his bed, and there was my mother's whisper from the doorway, her shadowed silhouette. Her arm reached for our father, and he stood and looked down at us both a long while, then he was gone. The house was quiet, my room dark and still. I lay awake and thought of all the good men on TV who'd been shot in the head. I saw again the dead soldiers lying on the ground, and until Pop had cried over us, I hadn't thought much about Jeb and me having to go and fight, too. But in only nine years I'd be as old as the dead, and it'd be my turn, wouldn't it?

BUT SOLDIERS HAVE to be brave, and I was not; I was a new kid in school again, something I would be over and over for many years, trying to find a solitary desk away from the others, dreading recess because everybody knew everyone else and threw balls back and forth and chased after each other grabbing and laughing, and I just didn't have the courage to jump in. Then some kid would see me looking and yell, "What're you lookin' at? You got a *problem*?"

Sometimes I'd get shoved and kicked and pushed to the ground. I was still trying to figure out what I'd done to make them mad, I had not yet learned that cruelty was cruelty and you don't ask why, just hit first and hit hard.

There was more fighting at home. My parents must've tried to keep it from us because it seemed to happen only late at night, both of them screaming at each other, swearing, sometimes throwing things—pots or pans, a plate or glass or ashtray, anything close by. When they fought, their Southern accents were easier to hear, especially my mother's, "Goddamn you, you sonofabitch." Pop's voice would get chest deep and he'd yell back at her as if she were a Marine under his command.

Many nights my brother and two sisters and I would listen from the stairs in our pajamas, not because we enjoyed it but because it was easier to bear when we weren't hearing it alone in our beds.

But by morning, the sun shone through the trees and most of the thrown or broken dishes in the living room would be picked up, the kitchen smelling like bacon and eggs, grits and toast and coffee, the

night before a bad dream already receding into the shadows where it belonged.

ONE SUNLIT AFTERNOON in the early fall our parents sat us down in the living room and told us they were getting separated. My father stood in the kitchen doorway. My mother leaned against the wall on the other side of the room. *Separated*. It was a word I'd never thought much about before, but now I pictured them being cut one from the other with a big, sharp knife. I sat in my father's chair, and I couldn't stop crying.

Then Pop was gone for weeks. One night, after Suzanne and Jeb and Nicole were asleep, I lay in bed listening to my mother crying in her room. It sounded like she was doing it into her pillow, but I could still hear it, and I got up and walked down the creaking floorboards of the hallway and knocked on her door. Her bedside lamp was on. She lifted her head, wiped her eyes, and smiled at me. I asked her if she was all right. She sat up and looked me up and down. She said, "I'm going to tell you because you're old enough to hear it. Your father left me for Betsy Armstrong. That's where he is right now, staying with her."

Betsy was one of the rich girls from the college. She had long straight hair and a pretty face. I remembered her laughing once in the kitchen with my mother. Now my mother got out of bed and leaned down and hugged me. I hugged her back.

Then Pop was home again. I woke one morning and heard his voice downstairs. I ran down there, and he hugged me. Later that day he was in the bathroom shaving. I went in there just to watch. I was ten years old, he was thirty-three. He turned from the mirror and said, "So you know about Betsy, then?"

The air in the room felt thicker somehow. "Yeah."

He reached into his wallet and pulled out a small photograph. He handed it to me. "That's her."

It was of a girl I barely remembered seeing before, not the one I'd thought she was. "She's pretty."

"Yes, she is." Pop took the photo and slid it back into his wallet. I left the bathroom and walked straight to the kitchen where Mom

stood at the sink washing dishes. I looked up at her face. She smiled down at me.

“Dad’s girlfriend is prettier than you are, Mom.” Her smile faded and she looked into the dishwasher and kept scrubbing. I walked back to the bathroom and told my father what I’d said.

He was wiping shaving cream from his face with a towel. He stopped, the towel still pressed to his cheek. “No, go apologize to her. Go tell her you’re sorry right now.”

I ran outside and into the woods. I don’t remember ever apologizing to my mother, but Pop was back, girlfriend or not, and for a while things seemed to get back to normal, and there was less fighting than before. Each night when Pop came home from teaching, Mom would be cooking in the kitchen and they’d have cocktail hour, which meant none of us kids were allowed in there while they sipped Jim Beam and our father unwound and told Mom his day and she told him hers.

Soon the hour would be over, and the six of us would sit at the rickety table in that small, hot kitchen and we’d eat. We lived in New England, but at suppertime our house smelled like any in south Louisiana: Mom fried chicken, or simmered smothered breakfast steak or cheap cuts of pork, all served up with rice and gravy and baking powder biscuits. On the side there’d be collard greens or sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions she’d put ice cubes on to keep crisp. She baked us hot tamale pies, and macaroni and cheese, or vegetable soup she’d cook for hours in a chicken stock, then serve in a hollowed-out crust of French bread, its top a steaming layer of melted cheddar. But while the food was wonderful, my mother and father hardly even looked at one another anymore and instead kept their attention on us, asking about school, about the tree fort Jeb and I were building out in the woods, about the Beatles album Suzanne listened to, the drawings Nicole did each afternoon. We rarely left the table hungry, but there was a hollowness in the air, a dark unspeakable stillness, one my father would soon drive into, and away.

IT HAPPENED EARLY on a Sunday in November. Pop was so much taller than the four of us, and we were following him down the porch stairs and along the path, Suzanne behind him in her cotton

nightgown, then me and Jeb in our pajamas, Nicole last, her thick red hair and small face. We were eleven, ten, nine, and six. Ahead of us, there was the glint of frost on the gravel driveway and our car, the old Lancer, packed now with Pop's things: his clothes, his books, his shaving kit. The house was surrounded by tall pines and it was too cold to smell them, the air so clear and bright. Inside the house Mom was crying as if her pain were physical, as if someone were holding her down and doing something bad to her.

Daddy! Nicole ran past us over the gravel and she leapt and Pop turned, his eyes welling up, and he caught her, her arms around his neck, her face buried under his chin. I tried to ignore our mother's cries coming from the house. When my father looked down at me over Nicole's small shoulder, I stood as straight as I could and I hoped I looked strong.

Pop kissed Nicole's red hair. He lowered her to the gravel. His beard was thick and dark, his cheeks and throat shaved clean. He was wearing a sweatshirt and corduroy pants, and he glanced up at our house. There was only the sound of our mother's cries, so maybe he would change his mind. Maybe he would stay.

He looked down at us. "I'll see you soon. We'll go out to eat."

He hugged Suzanne, squeezed my shoulder. He tousled Jeb's hair, then he was in his car driving down the hill through the pines, blue exhaust coughing out its pipe. Jeb scooped up a handful of gravel and ran down the hill after him. "You bum! You bum! You bum!" He threw it all at once, the small rocks scattering across the road and into the woods like shrapnel.

Pop drove across the short bridge, then up a rise through more trees. Mom would need to be comforted now. Nicole, too. There was food to think about. How to get it with no car. I tried to keep standing as straight as I could.

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