AFTER THE ACCIDENT

By Susan Hodara

Before The First Visit

I am compiling mental images of my father since he was hit by a car on Monday. They are composites of the information my mother is telling me, and now there are three. They are distinct, and they keep repeating in my mind. Each one leaves me feeling helpless and heartbroken, both of which I am.

The first is of the impact itself, and it is cartoon-like, flat. It haunted me Monday night after my mother called, and kept me from sleeping. They had been walking in the crosswalk of the parking lot of the hospital where my father takes an exercise class, when a car, moving fairly slowly, just didn't stop. It was driven by a woman in her 80s, not much older than my father, come to think of it, though my father lost the confidence to drive several years ago already. My mother told me she was so angry that she threw her gloves at the woman's car and yelled, "Didn't you see us?" She had, the woman stumbled her reply, but she thought they were further away.

My father was knocked down. He hit his head on the pavement and his leg was badly broken. He lay on the ground, my mother told me, shouting, "I can't move my leg! I can't move my leg!" Later, he kept asking

her whether it was his fault, and what had he done wrong.

The moment of my image is of my father falling. The car isn't visible; it's just my father sort of rolling on the ground just inches from the curb of the sidewalk. He's wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt tucked into darker blue trousers, and his graying hair is combed neatly back over his head. He has no coat, and in my mind, his brows are furrowed and his face holds the worried look he has when he's displeased or angry, or about to complain. He is flat, two-dimensional, and I'm seeing him from the side. His back is rounded, his shoulders hunched forward, his knees bent and brought up, so he almost forms a half-circle. He stays rigid in that position as he falls. If he fell backward, he might actually rock back and forth on his spine. When he hits the ground, he is on his side, his body held firm in the same position.

My second image comes from the next day, when my mother tells me about the night and the following morning awaiting surgery. I can only imagine how drugged he must be, waiting all that time with a broken leg. "He's only semi-conscious," my mother says, but I don't know what that means. Then she adds the information that forms my second vision of my father. "He's been acting kind of weird," she says, downplaying the way she does any extra concern but obviously disturbed nonetheless. "He keeps

saying it's too hot and trying to take off his clothes. I tell him, 'Don't do that. Don't do that.'" So I picture my father now lying on his back in a hospital bed, rails along the edges, wearing a light blue hospital gown now untied in the back. He has pushed the thin but ironed white sheet and some overly used, pilled wool blankets to the bottom of the bed, and he keeps tearing at his gown, pulling it away from his naked body underneath. His head is thrown back, his chin pointing towards the ceiling, his skin a little shiny and pinker than usual. The word that best describes the way I see his face is 'anguished'. If I were there, he wouldn't even know it.

My third picture is from after the surgery, and it includes sound. He is in a private room now in the pulmonary ICU so they can keep a close watch on him for a few days. I couldn't speak to him yesterday because he was still blurry from anesthesia and trauma. It seems I can't speak to him today either. "He's still kind of out of it," says my mother. When I press her, she tells me he's having trouble breathing because of congestion accumulated in his lungs from the anesthesia, "which," she adds, "is to be expected." He is uncomfortable, she says. Then I can hear it in the background, a sawing sound, breathing as if it were being spoken as well as breathed, in out in out with little bubbles of phlegm making popping sounds along the way. It goes on and on. "He's trying to cough something up but nothing is coming,"

explains my mother. What I picture now is my father in about the same position in his bed, still on his back, still wearing the blue gown. The bed has been remade, and the sheet and blanket are undisturbed over his chest. There are tubes now; he's having a blood transfusion and there must be some kind of IV to feed him. His head is still looking back, his brow still furrowed as he breathes out loud. The sound holds his voice in it; it couldn't be anyone else's breathing, and I can imagine him talking to me using the same tone. Only now it's the most of him that can be expressed, the need to clear his chest.

I see these images within the first 20 seconds of waking up in the morning. At first it's just an uneasy feeling, then my pictures rush in and with them the high-strung queasiness that stays with me all day. I carry them with me, waiting to hear if there's been any change, if he's getting any more comfortable, any more like himself. I rely on them as my only connection to what's going on there before I travel this weekend to visit, snapshots like the ones you're shown after someone else's vacation. I see the accident and the hospital, and I recognize that this will not be an easy recuperation.

It is only briefly, however, a few times each day, that I allow myself to feel the emotions that are attached to my pictures. Then it's like a wind whooshing through my chest, emptying it with a great force, then ushering

in powerful combinations of anger, pity, sadness and fear that make me have to sit down. Then my three images come back, all vibrant with these emotions, and I'm filled with what I keep wanting to call 'dismay'. Some say, "These things happen." Others express their temporary horror and offer their sympathies. I just seem to go about my daily business, overcome with all the terrible parts of my father's accident in those moments when I feel them, and otherwise just flipping through my pictures and shaking my head.

The First Visit

I finally make my way to the ICU on Saturday morning, where my mother and two brothers await me. By now my father's condition has deteriorated from a broken leg to a fat embolism that has traveled to his lungs and caused respiratory failure. Overnight, he has been intubated and sedated. When I see him, I realize that though his condition has become more complicated, my images weren't far from reality. His hospital gown is blue and white, and there is an ironed sheet covering him, pushed down to his waist. He is on his back, his head tilted slightly upward; his eyes are closed, but his eyebrows angle down towards his nose every now and then in some expression of discomfort. I am afraid he is having bad dreams, the way he seems to struggle in his drug-induced sleep.

It's the medical instruments I hadn't thought to picture. Every part of his body seems to be invaded. There are tubes everywhere, some carrying drugs and nutrition in, others delivering waste out. The biggest is the respirator that is fed down his throat and is now breathing for him, held in place by white tape wrapped several times around his head under his nose. The skin of his cheeks and neck bulges slightly under the tightness of the tape, and I worry for a moment until I realize that in the scheme of things now it hardly matters. His feet are encased in oversized pink foam rubber "booties," they call them, through which electrical current is sent to

stimulate his blood flow. His wrists are restrained so he won't unwittingly hurt himself in an urge to yank free. You almost forget that his leg is in a cast.

What strikes me first, though, is how small he seems and how still he's lying. Although he's sedated and can't talk, we're told he can hear us and register what we're saying. Still, I feel awkward, unsure of what to say. "Hi, Dad," I begin, "it's me, Sue." My words sound stilted but now they're all I have. I stroke his hair, smoothing it away from his forehead. His scalp feels greasy and rough, but the skin on his face is remarkably smooth. There is dried mucus on the side of his nose, and gathered in the corners of his eyes. Suddenly I think of his mother, my grandmother, and wonder if he longs for her now.

I talk for less than a minute, it seems, not long enough, I berate myself, thinking fast for more to say. I relay again the positive messages we've been told to tell him: "You're getting better, Dad. You have to keep fighting. Try to rest and it won't be long." He doesn't open his eyes. The nurse is so much better at reaching him; he actually seems to nod when she asks if he's too warm.

"We're here with you," I continue. "We love you." I stand by him a while longer in silence, still stroking, studying his face, the whiskers that have emerged around his chin, the yellow stain of Betadine that has dripped

down his neck, the whiteness of his shoulders that I haven't seen for years. When I talk to him, I'm afraid my voice will betray the fear and sadness that are filling me.

I look over at my mother, who is bolstered by her children's presence. She's small and solid, her shoulders slightly rounded with her 74 years. Though her face is more lined than I remember, she is remarkably stoic, sitting now with her knitting, a banana from home blackening in a napkin by her side. The only time she cries is when she tells us of her own father, who died when she was 10 during a botched hospital stay. The whole day passes quickly, though we've done nothing but sit and stand, and we're all tired when it's time to leave.

After the First Visit

I'm staying with my mother in the room that used to be my brother's, the room with the double bed that Paul and I sleep in when we visit. It's unsettling to see reminders of what my parents had been in the middle of. In the bathroom, a *New Yorker* magazine folded open to an article about Rembrandt. By my father's side of the bed, the top of a pen sitting next to a crumpled Kleenex on a stack of books. In the kitchen, the blanched almonds my mother had prepared for the ginger cookies she'd planned to bake the afternoon of the accident, when everything had so abruptly changed course.

Then I become almost giddy when I realize my father won't be hovering over every dish I leave unwashed in the sink, every chair I pull out from the table and don't push in when I get up, every crumb that drops from my toast to the floor. In the shower, it occurs to me that I don't have to worry about the hairs I might leave behind, but then I automatically wipe them away with the dry yellow sponge that sits on the edge of the sink, quickly scanning the bathroom for anything else askance, not out of habit, but in deference to my father.

Since the weekend, it's just a single image I'm holding of my dad. It's the one I have taken from the visit, in the hospital bed with all the tubes, the one with his eyes closed in sleep. My mother tells me he's more alert now,

feeling more pain as a result, but in my mind he's still asleep, until the next time I visit.

As for me, I'm restless. I take all Paul's shirts to the cleaner, stock up on milk; my approach is a just-in-case attitude, where nothing should be left undone. Even though I don't think I'm worried, I'm not sleeping well, and my eyes have a constant stinging sensation that I know is exhaustion. Yesterday I called upstairs to my younger daughter, Ariel, "David," my brother's name. I just said it right out loud, checking to see if she was almost ready for school. "David!" I yelled, saying the whole name before I realized my mistake. I puzzled for an instant about my state of mind, then laughed at myself in embarrassment.

Sometimes it comes to me that my father is in this predicament because he was hit by a car, and I conjure the old woman and wonder if she has any idea what she's done. Then I get so angry I feel like shaking, so frustrated I want to just push that part of the story away into the background where it usually is. After a while, I'm back to wondering how my father's doing, and I'm waiting again to update my vision. The phone calls tell me things like, "There's not much change," or, "They're still giving him blood," nothing I can really use, nothing that affects the picture. What I need, I realize, is my father himself, and the way I see it, I may have a long time to wait.

The Second Visit

We return to visit my father the following weekend, my husband Paul, my daughters Sofie and Ariel, and I. I have warned them about the tubes and repeated to the girls that he is unable to talk and that he might not wake up at all. But when we enter the room, his eyes are open. 'Oh, look! He's awake!" Last weekend he hadn't opened his eyes once. I am like a little girl filled with excitement.

Everything else about him is the same — the tubes, the regular hiss of the respirator. He is lying on his back and he is still. He is looking straight up, and when I go to the side of the bed, I see that his eyes are different from his healthy eyes. They are smaller and his left eyelid droops a little lower than his right. It's hard to tell where his eyes are focused.

I lean forward against the bedrail. "Dad, it's Sue." Slowly his head begins to turn towards me, and I am thrilled. "It's Sue," I say again, this time a little louder, and his head continues to move. His eyes stare above, aimed at the ceiling but leaning in my direction. "Can you hear me?" I ask, and see that his head gives the slightest nod in response.

A week before I wondered if he'd ever awaken again. "Sofie and Ariel are here," I tell him, enunciating slowly as if he spoke another language. Then I usher them in front of me, believing their voices can heal him as well as any drug. They speak to him one at a time. Sofie is

confident, but Ariel speaks too softly and doesn't know what to say. "Just tell him you're here," I urge. "Tell him you love him." Then his eyes close again and he drifts away.

It's like that throughout the day. Mostly his eyes remain shut, but we speak to him on and off anyway, taking turns stroking his hair and holding his hands. It strikes me that we are at a point when the fluttering open of my father's eyelids and the slightest movement of his head have become momentous events, and we hesitate to leave for dinner in case we miss another short period of this hazy wakefulness.

We return later to say goodnight, and it's then that I snap another image to add to my collection. My father is awake again, and this time when we say hello, he tries to lift his head. It is too much. His cheeks turn pink and he grimaces; a beep sounds from some piece of equipment, summoning a nurse. I step back for an instant in alarm, then approach him again and tell him, "Calm down, calm down. You have to rest and be still. It's okay." My anxiety dissolves into a strong caring instinct that I recognize from the way I comfort my daughters, and the way I responded to our cat right before she died. My hand smoothes the top of his head over and over, while across the bed, Sofie has taken his hand and is whispering, "Shhh, shhh," like she's talking to a baby. His head relaxes as we speak. "Good, good," we coo, so relieved when the signals stabilize.

But now he is more awake than before, and as I speak, he turns his eyes to find mine. "He's looking at me," I say to the room, nearly breathless as I peer closely at his eyes to see if they're really seeing me. "It's okay," I tell him, believing that they are.

What I see next touches my heart. There are tears. I'm sure of it. Not flowing, but there, cupped in his lower lids, gatherings of tears. His eyes have reddened just a little, and I am sure he is telling me his anguish, his love, and the flow of emotion still stuck inside him. "It's okay," I repeat, and he closes his eyes.

No one else sees my father cry, and when I tell them, they say you can't be sure what he's doing. But I believe in that moment he was letting me know how he felt, and though all he had were his eyes, it is an embodiment of my father that is branded in my mind and that I will never forget.

After the Second Visit

It was a turning point, that visit. I tell Sofie and Ariel it's because of them, that the sound of their voices gave him strength. By Monday night, the respirator was out, and now my father, though still very weak, is breathing on his own, eating, and talking. He has been moved off the ICU into another ward, where, my mother tells me, he has started to complain. "He wants to go home," she says. "When I told him I was going home to bed, he asked me, in all seriousness, 'Why can't I come with you?'"

The healthier my father gets, the unhappier he will become at having to stay in the hospital. He will complain about the food, and he may not like his nurses. He will be angry about his broken leg, and annoyed when he realizes how much work he has to do before he is able to walk.

"Now comes the hard part," my mother confides. For two weeks, she has sat by my father's bedside from morning till evening, knitting, reading the newspaper, taking short walks down hospital corridors, or, if it was warm enough, along the pathways outside that meander around the complex. She has had unexpected visits with her children, and more phone conversations with friends and relatives than she is used to.

With my father's healing comes another chapter, one in which my mother will be required to look out for his welfare in the hospital now that he doesn't have the immediate care of the ICU. It is one in which she'll

have to calm my father's anger and impatience, and failing to do so, bear the brunt of it. She will come earlier in the morning and leave later at night, perhaps feeling a guilt now that she didn't worry about when she left him drugged and sedated. For two weeks she sat with quiet purpose, unable to do more than speak softly and touch gently every once in awhile.

Though she is relieved, as we all are, and anxious for my father's full recovery, I wonder if there isn't a tinge of nervousness, maybe even of regret, as she bolsters herself to go through what must come next.

Meanwhile, I realize it is today that my parents had planned their first trip to visit us in over a year. It was a year my father spent regaining his health after several setbacks; a year when travel, sometimes even leaving the house, had been impossible. A month ago, things were looking brighter, and they dared to suggest a weekend trip.

Instead, it is I who am planning yet another trip to visit them, to visit my father who is still in the hospital. He is still being given morphine for pain, and my mother confesses, "He's really out of it." When I press for details, she tells me he says things out of context. "Let's go for coffee," he'll suggest, or, "Let's get out of here and go home." "It's noisy," he'll say, "and I'm tired." Sometimes in his sleep, he smiles and gropes at the air in front of him.

I'd been excited for my parents to come. They'd never seen our recently tiled floors, or the chairs we bought for the living room. One of the hardest things has been accepting that they might never see them.

"It's the drugs," I tell my mother, but we're both not sure where the man who was my father is now, and if he'll ever return.

The Third Visit

I fly to Washington for just the day. I am excited to see my father awake, to hear his voice again, but when I arrive in the morning, he is sleeping soundly, an oxygen mask covering his nose and mouth. I want to awaken him, though he looks so peaceful, and, watching him closely, I approach the bed. "Hi, Dad," I say, "It's Sue," but he doesn't respond and I don't have the heart to speak any louder. Later, when he opens his eyes, it's just for a moment before they close again.

A nurse sits in the room in a chair by the window. Her name is Shelley and she is studying from a chemistry textbook, her large cloth pocketbook perched on the wide sill next to a pile of sheets and blankets. "He has such a beautiful smile," she tells me, an odd comment, I think to myself, given the circumstances. She is there to keep an eye on him, but I feel awkward talking to my still-sleeping father, and I wish she would leave.

A few hours pass before he wakes again, and now his eyes are wide, startled, frightened above the mask. He stares at me as I talk to him. I tell him who I am. I want him to melt with pleasure, to smile with relief, but he just stares unknowingly. "Do his eyes always look like this?" I ask my mother, feeling alarmed myself, and she shakes her head no. I take my father's hand to calm him. As he falls back to sleep, I decide I was just part

of some mysterious dream, a blur of drug-shadowed conscious and unconscious which is his private world now.

In the afternoon, though, his head clears a bit. His eyes look normal now, as if they're looking out, seeing what we're all seeing, instead of barring any access the way they appeared when he was sedated, so small and inward. His eyes are hazel the way mine are, though dimmed, duller, as the whole of him seems to me. The nurse removes the oxygen mask so he can talk, and then I see why she'd mentioned his smile. His face lights up when he recognizes me.

"Sue," he says. This is the first time I've been able to talk with him, and I notice that his words are slurred like he's had too much to drink. His voice is husky and hoarse. I take his hand and he keeps smiling. He is like a child, looking up at me with a mixture of awe and confusion, his eyes happy and free of anything but love.

My father used to confess over and over that when my brothers and I were small, my mother would have to remind him, "You have to show them love."

"'Love?' I'd say to her. 'What do you mean, love?' You see," he'd confide, "I didn't even know what she meant." My father would tell me this to explain what he felt were his shortcomings as a father. He blamed his own parents, who, he says, raised him with no expression of love

whatsoever. He lived with his guilt at being unloving to us when we were young, and at not being a good-enough father.

Now, lying in his hospital bed, he is nothing but love, love in a world all his own. He is smiling and touching and telling my mother, then me, then my mother again how much he loves us. Sometimes I see him watching my mother as if he's just fallen in love. When I speak to him, his eyes gaze at mine as if rapt with interest, like a baby whose whole world is his mother's voice as she speaks to him. He nods and says, "Is that so? Is that so?", then smiles his broad smile again. He kisses my hand that he can barely navigate to his lips, and I kiss his forehead more easily than I've ever been able to kiss him before.

Hours pass and I am staring at him, holding his hand. His skin is smooth, his graying hair longer than usual and thick. "You look young," I tell him. "You look good." I let myself imagine I see the boy I never knew, the handsome young man who married my mother, the father I never thought of as old. They are all layered there on the man who now can barely move, and still cannot comprehend why. When I glance at my own reflection in the bathroom mirror, I am struck by my own resemblance to him.

My father has been lying immobile for almost three weeks, and now it's time to start physical rehabilitation, not just to teach him to walk on his

broken leg, but to strengthen the muscles that have atrophied from disuse. The physical therapist has shown my mother exercises she is to do with my father.

"Let's do your exercises," she suggests, and my father nods compliantly. She removes the blanket that cover his legs, and I see for the first time the brace that protects the break. It is the other leg, though, that is more shocking. It is white, hairless, and so very, very thin as it tapers to his ankle, which seems no bigger than my wrist. I see that the skin of his calf seems empty, a bag whose contents have been removed, as if there isn't any muscle there at all. It is so unnatural that I have to touch it, and when I do, I am struck by how soft it is, but how odd, how un-leg-like. Two more times during the afternoon, I touch his calf, just sticking out my finger and poking gently. I know he won't even notice and I am fascinated.

His body, though, is healing the way the doctors assure us it should. It is his mind that concerns us more. The doctors call it "lucidity", and the nurses test him by asking questions whenever they come in. Then it's like a quiz show, and we hold our breath to see if he'll say the right answer.

"Do you know what year it is, Mr. Rubin?"

My father glances up at the ceiling in thought. "The year is... the year is one thousand nine hundred and thirty five." They never tell him he's wrong, but

when he answers correctly, we all exclaim, “Good! Good!” like we’re talking to a small child.

“And do you know who the President is now?” He tries to think but doesn’t say anything.

We tell him about the millennium. We tell him it’s now 2000, and he looks at us with sincere interest.

“2000?” he says with surprise. “Really!”

“Yes.” I am determined now that he can know this. “It’s 2000. 2000.” I repeat it slowly. “Now, what year is it?” I try.

“The year is two thousand ... eighty four.” My heart sinks.

But mixed in with the confusion is the sense of humor my father was known for, and it pops up unexpectedly and makes us all laugh — a mixture of relief, familiarity and hope. Later, another nurse points to my mother and me sitting by my father’s bedside.

“Do you know who that lady is?” she asks.

“That is my daughter,” my father replies now without hesitation.

“And who is the lady sitting next to her?”

“That’s no lady,” quips my father. “That’s my wife.”

Sometimes he seems to drift away from us into another consciousness. He lifts his left arm again and again, studying it and turning it slowly as if

looking at a watch. But there is no watch; only an IV line and bruises from so many needles. He scrutinizes his fingertips, rubs them together a little and looks puzzled. Once he turns to me and asks, an open and questioning expression on his face, "So have you pretty much completed your secondary education?" It is this part I find most distressing.

We don't know where my father has gone, and though we've been told some disorientation is common after sedation and trauma, we worry that he won't come back.

A little later, he looks up at me and says, "Where do *you* come from?"

"It's me, Sue," but he doesn't seem to register. "Do you know who I am?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies. He does that. You ask him a yes or no question and that's the only answer you get. You have to ask further: "What?" or "Who?", which I do.

"You're one of the Levinson girls," he answers.

"I'm Susan, your daughter," I tell him firmly, a smile still fixed on my face. I glance at my mother. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," he says confidently. "You're one of the Levinson girls."

This is the only time I need to leave the room. When I return, he looks surprised and delighted again, reaches out his hand and says my name.

Interspersed with these periods are times of great agitation, when my father is angry that he can't go home.

"Shall we go home now?" he asks my mother, sometimes persisting for hours.

"Not yet," she answers again and again, trying to remain patient. "Why can't I?" he'll ask. "Why not? Tell me why we can't go home?" Sometimes he hits the bed in frustration, and once he told my mother he hated her because she wouldn't let him leave. After a while, he quiets down and stares ahead of him, then slowly his eyes close and we are relieved.

Late in the day, we're tired and no one is talking. The hospital television is tuned to a series of cooking shows, which we all stare at without the sound. I am sure my father isn't following the recipes, and neither am I. Suddenly he looks at me and says, "Life is sad." "What?" I ask, because I can't be sure. "Life is sad," he repeats, and at that moment I feel nothing could be truer.

When I am home again, I wake up in the middle of the night from a dream about my father. My family is there and we are all concerned because someone is ill. My father is worried, the expression on his face serious. Then I see it is the same face I've been staring at all day, the one with the smooth skin and the thick gray hair, and I remember it is my father who is

ill. When I awaken, I miss him and wish he could still be one of us.
I can talk to my father on the telephone now, so I call the hospital each day. I visualize him laying there, his face serious, the phone pressed gently against his cheek.

"Hi, Dad," I say with cheer and enthusiasm.
"Hi, Sue," he responds, his voice gravelly and airy. I still hear the slur in his words.

"How are you?" I ask, and he says, "Oh, not bad today," or instead, in a much quieter voice, "Today I just feel down, so down in the dumps."
I try to reassure him; I think fast for things to say; I make my comments in the form of questions: "Are you more comfortable today?" "Did you have physical therapy yet?" "Did you sleep well last night?" His answers are short, but always full sentences: "Yes, I am." "Yes, I did, Sue." "Last night? Last night I slept pretty well." If I don't keep talking, I'm afraid he'll just be silent, but once, after a pause, he says, "All's well that ends well."
I'm not sure I heard correctly, but he says it again: "All's well that ends well." "That's right," I say, "All's well that ends well."