

# Part I

Self under self, a pile of selves I stand  
Threaded on time

Norman MacCaig, 1953

## Chapter 1

# Arrivals and Departures

If hands could free you, heart,  
Where would you fly?

Philip Larkin, 1945

Bags of belongings thud down the chute and glide smoothly by. I'm watching them, drowsily mesmerised, when up she walks – Lexi, my ex, who kindly offered me a ride and a room – and I see straight away that something is wrong. It's the way she clears her throat before saying hi; it's her hug, warm but perfunctory, though it's a year since I've been here.

I flip a wayward curl from her face, tell her she looks like a squirrel. But instead of responding in her usual way, with a sly smile or an eye roll, Lexi takes my hands in hers, clears her throat again, says, 'I have news,' by which time I'm flashing through a mental list of mutual friends. Who's split up? Or is someone sick? Has there been a terrible accident?

'It's your dad,' she says. 'He's doing fine but he's at Northwest. He had emergency surgery the night before last. A quadruple bypass.'

She looks at me like it's my turn to speak.

'His heart,' Lexi says, dropping my hands to form an X across her chest,

as if I need a lesson in where a heart resides. ‘He had a major heart attack. But he’s doing fine.’

I chew my lower lip to keep my thoughts from flying out. You tell me how *your* father is, I tell you how *my* father is – that’s how this is meant to go. And *I* know he’s fine, we talked last week. Whereas you haven’t talked to him in ten, twenty years, and even then only once or twice. ‘He’s controlling,’ you said back in the day, with a shiver of disgust. All because he piled your plate with honeydew, yet now you have the gall to greet me with ‘He’s doing *fine*’?

His heart, did she say?

My own heart tilts, yet remains fixed, like a globe of the world, fastened on its axis but tilting, turning. As if somebody passing by has given it a casual twirl, spilling me onto a foreign land where I do not speak the language.

That pity gaze, unbearable. I turn my head, see a slope of chrome, a row of chairs, bodies sitting slumped, others bustling by, one with a bag I swear I know, a bag I saw glide past me long ago. It’s there, then it’s rolled away.

‘It was Beth who called,’ Lexi says. My stepmother.

I shake my head. ‘I’m telling you he’s never had heart trouble, I mean never.’

Lexi keeps cutting in to explain, I keep trying to get her to see this news is too preposterous to be true. Because my brain keeps telling me it can’t be true; because after a thrilling week of travel and work, I’m seriously sleep deprived; because Northwest Hospital was Mom’s domain, hers and mine; because I know Beth, know how confused she gets by doctor talk; because I’ve just learned something I didn’t know: I cannot fathom life without my father, the very idea has catapulted me into a freefall of fury and fear – as if in a world devoid of Dad, I too would cease to exist.

But he didn’t die. He’s doing fine. Lexi’s explanation repeats, settles chunk by chunk into a story I can grasp.

My dad had been having chest pains for several days before he let his by-then frantic wife call 911. He was rushed straight into surgery. When

Beth got home from the hospital, she called me in Sydney, but getting no answer tried Lexi, whose number I'd stuck on their fridge years ago as an emergency contact. Lexi knew I was spending my pre-Seattle week in New Hampshire but didn't know where.

'But why didn't you email me?' Part protest, part plea.

'By the time I heard, he'd already pulled through. And your play was on, I didn't want to ruin that.'

'It's a play, I mumble. Not a parent.'

'Anyway, I knew you'd be here in just two days.'

*Two whole days*, I want to scream. But what does it matter now? My daddy nearly died. I crumple inside my coat, which now feels enormous, decades too big.

Tucking me into her side, Lexi offers to take me to see him.

We reach the lift, squash in. 'Didn't you check any luggage?'

Out we flail as the doors begin to close. Back we go to the Baggage Claim, where things deemed worth carting coast to coast, worth keeping close, now make their desolate rounds in the few bags that remain. Lexi hoicks mine from its loop of time and sets it squarely down. I'm seized by a wish that I lived here still, among people who know me so well they can even spot my suitcase, who love me so well they accommodate whatever baggage I bring.

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We ride in silence. Now and again, Lexi pats my knee. We're traversing the U District before I realise that my father's chest was being cleaved open *while* I was watching my play. Our two hearts exposed simultaneously, his surgically, mine symbolically.

After the performance, overcome by a visceral longing for my father's voice and a desire to share my achievement with him, I picked up the hotel phone, then realised he didn't know I'd written a play. I tried to

imagine telling him. I set down the phone, opened my laptop, finalised my workshop for the next day, distracted all the while by a tugging sensation, like a father–daughter umbilical cord.

I picked up the phone again. It was late. I needed sleep. *Don't mention the play, just tell him you love him and will see him soon. One minute max.* I tried to imagine that: a sixty-second call to my dad. I set down the phone but lay awake for hours, spellbound by the snow shining through the crack in the curtains, glinting off the tall dark trees.

I confess to Lexi the call that wasn't. 'I should've called,' I say.

'It doesn't matter, he wasn't home.'

'But I could've talked to Beth.' The words come out as a wail.

'She wasn't home either.' Lexi hands me a tissue, pats my knee.

'She wasn't home?' I sound alarmed. I am alarmed.

'Beth was at the hospital,' Lexi says. I think she's already explained this. 'She stayed until Russ was in recovery. She was petrified he was going to die. She thought the surgeon was out to kill him.'

'Who can blame her? So many surgeries aren't even—'

'No, no, it wasn't that. She met Russ's surgeon. She thought he was a terrorist.'

Lexi shoots me a look that my brain can't translate due to oddity overload. My stepmother calls my long-ago *lover*? My father's heart explodes *while* I'm watching my play? Is this a cosmic warning: express yourself again and he will die? And now, the man who cut open my father's chest had *murder* on his mind?

'Beth was scared he was out to kill her too,' Lexi says with a low chuckle.

The words fail to compute. The sky dims. It starts to rain. Strings of diamonds pelting down, lacy ribbons of light against the pink-grey sky.

Lexi flicks on the wipers. Left, right, left, right, the rubbery blades slice. Clarity, blur, clarity, blur. But in my mind there is only blur: shining snow, silver chair legs, hands forming an X. Isolated images that don't connect.

‘So, how did your play go?’

‘Good,’ I say, though already I can’t picture any of the actors, or recall one question from the post-play Q&A. This is how it goes. I touchdown at Sea-Tac and my grown-up life – teaching, writing, research – all but disappears. Like the Etch A Sketch I had as a kid, one sharp shake and my scribbles vanish.

While the wipers fight for clarity and the heavens rain down blur, one image intensifies: that maddening X. The misplaced fury it engendered in me, as if Lexi’s simple gesture – hands across chest – were a violation, were the problem itself: the reason my dad’s heart nearly stopped.

‘She thought he was a *terrorist*?’ I exclaim. ‘Why?’

Lexi tells me what Beth told her: Dad’s surgeon was wearing a turban. ‘Maybe he’s Sikh,’ Lexi says with a shrug.

I’ve never heard my stepmother say anything racist. Hell of a time to start – turn the person saving your husband’s life into a murderous fiend?

‘Or maybe it was his surgical cap,’ Lexi says. ‘Who knows?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I mumble, and what I mean is: I’m sorry you had to listen to that. I’m sorry I once stuck your number on their fridge. I’m sorry for being bull-headed before. I’m sorry I left all those years ago, what a fool I was to leave you, and my friends, and my family, in hot pursuit of Liv, an Aussie I’d kissed at a conference but barely knew. Also: I’m sorry you told me what Beth said, because haven’t I endured enough parental mortification to last the rest of my life?

‘Parents,’ Lexi says, and I’m gratified that of all the words in the English language, she chose the one that best encapsulates the weirdness of this world.

Lexi takes my hand in hers. ‘What matters is your dad’s okay. And you’re here, how lucky is that?’

She drops me at the double doors.

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I stop at Reception, where the volunteer directing visitors to loved ones' rooms used to be me at sixteen. Candy-stripers, they called us then, in our pink-and-white pinafores. My mother used to work the evening shift at the switchboard, which used to be a few feet away. Now it's a blank wall.

'Northwest Hospital,' she'd answer in her clipped, businessy voice. 'How may I direct your call?' During lulls between visitors, I'd watch her pull from the dangling mass of cords just one, tipped with ruby or gold, and plug it into the right numbered hole, because it's not willy-nilly, I learned, there's a system, a pattern that must be honored or the caller gets cut off.

Technologies advance, hospitals remodel, mothers move on. The past gets walled off.

I stride through familiar corridors to the beat of my childhood mantra: *I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.*

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I expect to see Dad looking pale and frail, but the instant I step into his room a happy cheer rises from the crowd. It's a veritable party in here. Cards, balloons, Beth in a satiny blouse, their church friends Darryl and Madge, an orderly removing a tray, and there in the centre of the room, propped on the plump pillows, reigning over the festivities like a king on his throne, that big balding head, that enormous grin, those bright, shining eyes.

'Cynnnn-thi-aa!' My father makes my name a melody, an adoring decrescendo of delight. 'You came all the way from Australia! How did you know I was here?'

'Oh, I always keep track of you!' I say and everybody laughs. Bending for a hug and kiss, taking care not to nudge the clear thin tubes draped across his nose and down his neck, I marvel at my father, who's not one to let major surgery dampen his zest for life.

During his discharge later in the week: ‘Do you need any help at home?’ the nurse asks. ‘Because we can send out an aide.’

‘No, no,’ my stepmother says. ‘I can take care of him.’

‘But wouldn’t you like some help?’ I say.

‘We’ll be fine,’ she says, with a warning look as if to say *my* husband, *my* house.

‘We’ll be fine,’ Dad echoes. The nurse believes them.

Once he’s home, I clear three placemats on the dining table, scooping off mail and knick-knacks. Beth’s embarrassed: ‘No, honey, I’ll do that.’ Dad’s irked: ‘Leave that there.’ I sing out: ‘It’s only temporary.’

Bussing back and forth from Lexi’s house to theirs, I take Dad through his exercises several times a day – raise your arms, stretch your neck, and when you cough, squeeze the hospital pillow to your chest.

‘I can’t believe I have a bum ticker,’ Dad keeps saying. ‘I’ve never been sick a day in my life.’

He’s always been fond of repeating himself, but now every time I step into his sight: ‘Cynnnn-thi-aa! You’ve come all the way from Australia!’

*Nope, just back from the bathroom, Dad.*

Memory problems, we’re told at his follow-up appointment, are common after this type of surgery. Give it time, the good doc says.

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On my next Seattle visit, some nine months later, Dad’s short-term memory is only slightly better. I insist we see the specialist (‘No need,’ Dad says, ‘I’ve never felt better’), only to be informed that a small percentage of people who undergo Dad’s type of surgery gain not only a stronger heart but also a new problem: vascular dementia.

‘When will he get his memory back?’ Beth asks.

The specialist shrugs. ‘Maybe six months. Maybe never.’

I look at Beth, who looks at Dad, who looks at me and smiles. Not his

real smile but the placid one he often shows us now. It occurs to me that I'm the only person in this room who remembers him young and agile. Teaching me to wrestle on the living room floor. 'It ain't over till you say "Uncle"', he'd shout, buying me time to twist free of his hold and lift one shoulder. Racing toy cars on the flimsy track that kept coming unfastened, which would get him so upset I was always having to distract him.

'Maybe never,' I murmur, more an echo than a question.

The specialist nods. I stare past her out the window. A sky so thick with clouds it appears cloudless, a vast wash of white.

I stare at my father, that wan smile. No sign of the man I know, his zeal and humour, his feistiness and charm, his irascibility.

The specialist asks her patient if he has any questions. At that, Dad springs back into himself:

'Home, from the city that snares and enthralls me;  
Home, from the bold light and bold weary crowd.'

He pauses to let the words sink in. 'Fannie Stearns Davis,' he says. 'From a book of hers called *Crack O' Dawn ...* 1915, if I remember rightly.'

I raise my eyebrows at my dad to show my appreciation, poetry being his main passion in life. Most of the poems in his repertoire were written before he was born. He can rattle off his favourite stanzas by heart and has been reciting to me since before I could walk, which must be why poetry feels like part of me – part of my bones, my patterns of thought, my outlook on life. And long-dead poets part of my circle of companions, for I find it comforting to know that whatever I'm feeling or going through, somebody a century or so ago not only felt much the same as me but took the time and care to put it into verse.

The specialist glances at her watch and wheels her chair back as if to say, *listen, you kooks, it's 2002 and your allocated time is up.*