

Explorations of the Text

1. How does the mother view her daughter Emily as a baby?
2. How do economic and social circumstances affect the mother's ability to take care of Emily?
3. Observe Emily as a baby and at different stages in her life. According to the narrator, what needs, yearnings, and conflicts shape the daughter's view of herself?
4. Analyze the images describing Emily's body. How do societal conceptions of beauty figure in Emily's development?
5. How does the mother feel about herself as a parent? Is she a good mother? Is she to blame for what has happened to Emily?
6. Explore the significance of the title and the symbol of ironing. Discuss Tillie Olsen's critique of woman's position in society.
7. How does the opening, the interchange between the unnamed social worker and the mother, develop the story?

The Reading/Writing Connection

1. Think: What effect does the first-person point of view have on the story? Rewrite several passages in third person. How does the perspective change?
2. Write a monologue in the voice of Emily, and present her version of her upbringing. Or write a letter from Emily to her mother.

Ideas for Writing

1. Compare this story with "Scar" and/or "Burn Your Maps."
2. Some psychologists suggest that "wounds" in childhood may later become sources of creativity. Is there support for this theory in the story?
3. Continue the story. What is going to happen to Emily?

Start
here →

Dean Bakopoulos (1975-)

Some Memories of My Father 2005

I missed my father's cheese sandwiches, the way most nights around nine o'clock he'd go to the fridge, take out two slices of Wonder bread and two pieces of individually wrapped American cheese, and make a sandwich. The process by which he did this was nearly surgical and it yielded a perfect sandwich, square and neat, nothing falling out from the sides. He never left a crumb on the counter. He simply put the perfect sandwich on a clean plate, set a pickle down beside it, and returned to the television, where he was watching, no doubt, PBS or the evening news. Such methodical operations my father sometimes had, and I missed them. I missed the smell of his breakfast in the morning (one poached egg, dark rye toast, Nescafé). I missed the way he folded his newspaper, leaving it, finally, at day's end, open to the crossword puzzle (which he always seemed able to finish, every slot, using a green felttip pen). I missed the slippers

at his bedside, the smell of cigarette smoke hanging in the bathroom, the cracking of his knuckles, the precise way he folded towels.

Yes, it's true that I missed my father, but in a larger sense, I missed all the fathers. I'd drive into other neighborhoods, neighborhoods with names like Quail Ridge and Oak Hills where people could not even imagine the mass exodus we had experienced, and I'd watch the fathers washing cars or practicing golf swings. In these neighborhoods, fathers could be seen strolling up and down driveways, monitoring the progress of the landscapers and deck-builders and sprinkler-system-installers. Neighborhoods like this could have been a million miles away from us.

What I missed most was the collective drone of our fathers' lives, their big and clumsy presence. I even missed their cussing and their labored breathing from too many cigarettes. I missed the roar of the sick engines inside the hoods of the hobby cars that would never run quite right. I missed their beer and coffee breath, missed their cheap aftershave that stunk up the church on Sunday mornings. I missed the cranking of their power tools on Saturday afternoons, and the roar of their voices while watching the Lions play on television. I even missed the yelling, the arguments gone over the edge, the occasional sound of a fist going through the door.

Still, in truth, I could remember very little about my father. Already, in a matter of less than a year, his image had grown vague and hazy. I listed the few memories I had in a notebook, afraid they might leave me:

I am three years old, my father is smoking and sweating, swearing at some sort of machine, while I sit on a concrete floor, banging an old coffee can with a screwdriver.

I am four. My father and I are stacking firewood at the side of the house. A hornet swirls around my head and lands on the small log that I am holding. My father says nothing, puts his hand out. I give him the log. The hornet doesn't budge. My father takes his pocketknife, flips it open with one hand, and sticks the blade into the hornet, pinning it to the wood. I hear an anemic buzz and the hornet falls to the grass in two pieces.

Five years old. We are at a wedding. It is late. Ambulances have arrived. Somebody has had a heart attack. Some adult, a mustached man with floppy gray hair, pours beers on my head. I start to cry. My father grabs the beer-pourer by his necktie and throws him to the floor.

When I am six, my father lives in the basement for a week. He sleeps on the couch, does not shave, never goes to work. Sometimes my mother and I hear him vomiting in the bathroom down there. My mother says he is sick. We sometimes hear him crying, loud sobs. I am not allowed to go downstairs. He stays there for another week, a third week. My mother goes downstairs only after I am in bed, and they yell at each other so that I can't sleep. One night there is the crash of a broken mirror and the sound of a hole being kicked into the wood paneling. In the morning, my father joins us for breakfast and, clean-shaven, returns to work.

When I am seven, my father disappears for a weekend. Eventually, my mother calls the police, who find him hitchhiking on I-75. My mother asks: Where were you going? My father says: Maybe Florida?

When I am eight, my father announces that he is breaking the Good Friday fast, and that he doesn't want any goddamn fish, what he wants is kielbasa and ham.

He rips into our Easter meats and sits at the table, drinking beer and eating pork. My mother yells at him; she tries to call the priest on the telephone but he doesn't answer. My father inhales the smoky smell of kielbasa and offers me a piece. I take it, eat it, then eat several more. My mother yells for me to stop. My mother begs me, but my father laughs and so I laugh with him. Later, my father leaves the house, and it's me and my mother in the kitchen. She is trying to salvage what's left of the meat for basket blessing the next afternoon. She says I've done a horrible, sinful thing. In my room that night, I stay up as late as I can, crying and saying the Rosary, begging the Virgin Mary to ask Jesus to forgive me, although, because it is Good Friday, I am not sure if Jesus is available.

When I am nine, my father announces that we are moving to Arizona, and he and my mother stay up all night fighting. My mother says, "What do you hope is different for us in goddamn Tucson, Roman?" And my father says, "Everything." But by morning, my father no longer mentions Arizona, and we never move or discuss it again.

When I am ten, my father kisses a woman at an office party. He confesses this to my mother, moves out for a week, and then comes back home, bearing two large pizzas and a jug of root beer.

When I am eleven, my father gets a ticket for drunk driving. My mother threatens to leave him.

When I am twelve, my father grows a beard and mustache and begins to work in the garden, bird-watch, and listen to opera. He quits drinking for six months and buys a family pass to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

When I am thirteen, while we're eating cheeseburgers at a White Castle, my father tells me that I should prepare myself for disappointment. "This is the way our lives turn out, Mikey," he says. "Disappointing."

When I am fourteen, my father and I drive to Florida after his uncle Five dies. We think we are set to inherit nearly half a million, but instead, we find that Uncle Five has spent all his money on his widow, a thirty-one-year-old waitress who won't let us in the house. On the way home, my father says, "This is what I mean by disappointment."

These were my fragments of my father. I could remember only his many phases, his fleeting obsessions, and his periodic bouts with depression. I'm not saying there was no happiness in my childhood. No, I remember my father as a loving, big-hearted man capable of hitting low points that lasted for weeks. I remember him often looking confused and broken, as if he'd just woken up from a long sleep plagued by sad dreams. Still, although I tried and I tried, I couldn't retrieve a single extended memory: there was no camping trip that we took alone, no long talk in which he offered me advice, no fishing from a metal rowboat, just us guys, our lines in the water and the sun barely starting to rise. And this is one of the things that I was afraid of that my father was gone for good and that my memories of him weren't clear and lasting. Perhaps my memory was just bad. My memories of my childhood were pleasant ones, mostly. But they were dim, and my father was a shadow in them all.

Now only one thing remains:

When I was sixteen, my father went to the moon. ●

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Explorations of

1. Upon reading the story, how would you describe the protagonist's father? Was your character?
2. Why might the father's neighborliness, "fled the other neighborhood their families?" "neighborhood Ridge and Oa

The Reading/V

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Ideas for Writ

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