

Peaches

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Listen to *this*, my father said.

His hair was pulled back into a frizzy brown ponytail. When he wore it down, people thought he looked like Charlie Manson. His hippie friends got stoned with him and swore he was Jesus Christ. But ponytailed, he was just a typical bum in denim cut-offs, with bare feet, a mustache, and for the moment, a navel-length beard. Over the years, his beard would go through short and long phases, full and thin phases, there and gone phases, but his mustache would never leave his face.

Just listen, he said again. *You're going to love this*.

He set the album on the turntable and lowered the needle. Zappa again. I was five and I could already differentiate between “normal” music and Zappa music. Xylophones, horns, and guitars all thrown together in a medley of weirdness that my father worshipped. He danced across the living room.

Peaches en Regalia, he yelled above the music.

I must have given him a strange look then because he continued yelling, as if to explain: *The name of this song. Peaches en Rega-*

lia. You like it? I knew you'd like it.

He danced into the kitchen, over to the junk drawer. Matchboxes, roach clips, a Ziploc full of pot, my finger-paints, patchouli incense, a collection of Ontario Hydro receipts, and his harmonica. He lifted the harmonica from its case and began to blow.

It didn't belong in this song. Cacophonous, even for Zappa—like a cheese grater rubbing against my mother's nylons. I cringed.

My father put the harmonica back in its case and danced over to me. Peaches was coming to an end. I heard the first notes of Willie the Pimp before my father pulled the needle away from the vinyl and brought the album cover to me.

I was propped up on the couch, three pillows beneath my neck and a wet washcloth across my forehead. My father tossed the album cover into my lap. FRANK ZAPPA HOT RATS: A purple-tinted picture of a pasty-skinned, black-eyed freak peeking over a slab of pink granite. The freak had a whole poodle's worth of curly hair on top of its head. The hair was blood red.

I bought it for you, my father said. To make you feel better.

The freak stared at me.

Earlier that afternoon, my mother had urged me to sit inside an old doghouse. She thought it would make a cute picture. I crawled inside and twisted around to face the opening. My mother waved, smiled, and removed the lens cap from our camera. My father stopped talking to Roger, a bandmate of his, who had crashed at our house the night before. They both nodded in my direction and stared at me through a thick haze of yellow and blue cigarette smoke. I was the one being photographed, but from where I was positioned, it was easy to pretend the adults were the subject. My mother in the foreground, her long Indian print skirt brushing over sandaled feet. Our lawn messy with dandelions and other shaggy

weeds, running unevenly to the peeling fence, where my father stood with Roger. They were smaller than my mother, foreshortened, and the smoke drifting around them made them appear unreal and distant. The sky was an absurd blue bleeding down around all of them and everything was framed neatly by the church window-shaped mouth of the old doghouse. I was smiling hard for the camera when I heard a buzzing noise and began to feel flecks of what at first felt like dirt spraying my face. It didn't take long to realize that these flecks were sharp. My skin was being pinched and pierced. I swung my arms wildly and began to scream. I heard my mother's voice yell *Wasps!* and then my father's arms, rough but warm, were reaching in and pulling me out of the buzzing dog house.

The wasps had attacked me mainly from the neck up. They had stung the inside of my nose and my mouth, making it difficult to breathe. My entire face was glossy and swollen with stings. My mother ran every clean washcloth in the house under cold water.

She sent my father to the store with instructions to buy some children's aspirin. He came back three hours later with the Zappa album, and no aspirin in sight. By then, the puffiness in my face had abated somewhat. My mother peeled away all of the washcloths except for the one on my forehead. My father bent over and adjusted it, flipped it to the cool side.

She's fine, he said to my mother.

Only then did my mother begin to shout at him, her long black hair swaying angrily against her back. She followed him into the kitchen, where my father's voice took over.

I was alone on the couch with the freak.

WHEN I TELL THIS STORY to my father now, he laughs so hard he knocks over his mineral water and the waitress has to bring him a new one. He doesn't remember a thing about the doghouse, the washcloths, the wasps. He remembers the Zappa album, though, and asks if I still have it. I tell him I do. He smiles and sips at his mineral water.

That's a collector's item, you know. *Man, when I think of all those albums I left behind ...* he shakes his head, still smiling, and taps his fingers against the table. *I gave you one hell of a record collection,* he says.

No, I think to myself. I took it.

SEVERAL MONTHS after the wasp incident, my father left. He joined the carnival and traveled south with his company for some bookings in the States.

Think of me as a bird, he said, *I have to migrate.*

My sister was three weeks old.

Occasionally, he would send postcards. The postcards never had pictures of the cities he and the other carnies had visited. Instead, they were printed on crinkly beige paper, and they all featured sketches of a grinning gnome named Jackie. Stars, coils, and exclamation marks floated around Jackie's head. On one postcard, Jackie was holding a goblet of dark juice in one hand, a fat mushroom in the other. There was Jackie sniffing glittery dust, Jackie smoking a thick joint, and always on the back of these postcards was my father's staccato handwriting. Unvaryingly, he began with his trademark greeting, *High guys!*

Once, my father sent a newspaper clipping. It was a black and white photo of himself, taken in front of the Tilt-a-Whirl. His face was leaner, his beard longer. He had a mole between his eye-

brows, which he had always told me was his third eye, and which the newspaper photo had made indistinct. A spotted dog slept on his lap.

The caption beneath the photo said something about my father adopting the dog, naming it Captain Beefheart. Some basic information about pet adoption followed, along with the address of the local Humane Society. The caption mistakenly identified my father as Paul Law, a name I had never heard before. Years later, I would learn that he had been working in the States illegally and had thought an alias was necessary in order to avoid deportation. But at the time, I was six. I knew only that Paul Law was a stranger with familiar features.

The day after I received the newspaper clipping, my hair began to fall out. I had tucked the photo underneath my Cookie Monster pillowcase at night, hoping that I would wake up to find Paul Law gone and my father's name in his place. But the next morning, Paul Law was still Paul Law, and there were strands of my hair decorating Cookie Monster's cotton-poly head. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. They gave me green shampoo that smelled like urine and advised my mother to have my hair cut short. But the shampoo didn't work and the haircut made my bald patches even more noticeable. Finally, I took Paul Law and placed him in an empty box of Ritz crackers. I hid the cracker box in our basement.

I THOUGHT THAT HAPPENED *to your sister*, my father says. *Anyway, I remember your mother calling me all freaked out about one of you going bald. Paul Law. Man, do I remember Paul Law. It wasn't just an alias, you know. It was a way of life. A philosophy.*

What do you mean? I ask.

The waitress brings our salads over and places them on the red and white checkered tablecloth. My father doesn't wait for her to leave before he answers my question. He is not like me, not like me at all.

Think about it, he says, Naming yourself after your enemy. I was hiding from the law, so I became Paul Law. I was someone else. I could do anything I wanted and no matter what I did, it wasn't really me doing it. You see?

I nod vaguely at him. For so many years, I have been silent. I lean over and stab a cherry tomato with my fork.

EVENTUALLY, MY FATHER ENDED UP in Hollywood, Florida. He paid \$760 cash for an old green and yellow trailer home in the Oak Grove mobile home park and summoned us to join him there. My mother sold all of our belongings that didn't fit into her trunk, and we arrived just before Christmas. Our first day there, we bought a sack of oranges and grapefruits from a roadside fruit stand. We paid twenty bucks for a two foot tree. It bled sap all over the back seat of our Buick. At home, we stood the tree up inside an old lobster trap and ate the oranges. That night, my sister and I watched a Sesame Street Christmas special starring Oscar the Grouch and Big Bird. My father sat with us.

If that bird starts talking, he said, I'm outta here.

And by the time our tree came down a week later, he was.

My mother panicked and took two jobs. In the mornings, she cleaned a bar named MacDees. My sister and I went with her and fought over who got to play Ms. Pac-Man and who got to sing disco songs into the microphone on the corner stage. My mother emptied ashtrays, bleached toilet bowls, and mopped up beer and broken glass. At nights, she waitressed at Mickey Rats, a late night

lounge along the Intracoastal, while my sister and I sat on the front porch of our trailer, eating pizza and listening to Alma, our babysitter, tell horror stories.

After a few weeks, my mother decided to sell the Buick, which she had not been able to start since my father left. She put an ad in the paper, but when five days went by without a single reply, she finally sold it to Pigpen, Oak Grove's resident junk man. He gave her ten bucks and sat behind the wheel while my mother pushed the car three speed bumps down to his trailer. The next day, he made a point of driving past our home several times, honking the horn, waving, and grinning a big toothless grin.

Within a week, the Buick's backseat was window-high in aluminum cans. Newspapers were stacked in a pile on the passenger seat, and the trunk was tied open. Inside the trunk sat Pigpen's wife. Together, they rode slowly around the trailer park. Whenever Pigpen spotted an empty beer can or a drifting sports section, he would yell to his wife, who would jump out and retrieve it. Our old car looked terrible, but the trailer park was pretty damn clean.

My mother was relieved when my father wrote to us a few months later, saying that he would be coming home. She gave two weeks notice at MacDee's and got a haircut.

On a weekend in mid-July, my father was dropped off in front of the trailer park. The first person he saw was Pigpen, tooling around in his recycling bin on wheels.

THE WAITRESS CLEARS our salad plates. My father winks at her and says *Thanks, dear*. She rolls her eyes and walks away.

Look, my father says. I don't remember any of this. If I made some mistakes, I'm sorry. But I'll tell you one thing. You weren't exactly the perfect daughter, either.

I pick at my paper napkin, while he describes the one thing he remembers about my childhood. The day I ran away at Disney World. Only he has the story all wrong.

You just took off, he says. *We turned around and you were gone. Do you know what it's like to just lose a kid like that? We didn't know what to do. Can you imagine what might have happened if we didn't find you?*

He actually manages to sound sincere.

You ruined our whole trip, he says.

BUT HE DOESN'T REMEMBER that there almost wasn't a trip at all. He doesn't remember getting so drunk the night before we were supposed to leave that he pulled our phone off the wall and threw it at my sister. He doesn't remember smashing our cable television box, spilling leftover chicken cacciatore all over the kitchen, passing out in the bathtub with his clothes on.

My mother was furious. She told me and my sister to pack our things anyway, we'd go with or without him. We heard her screaming at him, swearing that this was the last straw. She'd take us up to Disney World and then keep right on driving and never come back. He sat in the bathtub moaning until morning, when he surprised all of us by brushing his teeth and adding his hastily packed duffel bag to the cluster of luggage by the front door. My sister and I had to keep quiet during the drive up so that he could sleep off the remainder of his hangover.

Once we were inside the Magic Kingdom, I decided that I didn't want to leave. While my family huddled over a map of the park, I walked slowly backwards a few steps, then turned and ducked into a souvenir shop. I was amazed at how quick, how simple it all was. One minute, I was a member of an anonymous fam-

ily of four on vacation, all of us at least somewhat similar with our deep tans, T-shirts, and long, dark hair. The next minute I had disappeared, slipped into obscurity with an effortlessness that made me wonder whether I hadn't grown invisible. Almost immediately, I became aware of the physical difference my departure had produced. Everything about my body felt vulnerable—my skin prickled, my mouth felt dry, my hands clenched and unclenched with the same unconscious exertion my heart required to beat. The people around me seemed to be talking much louder and I cringed as dozens of conversations wound through my head. I stood motionless near a window which provided me with an unobstructed view of my parents and my sister. I found it strange and more than a little unnerving that they looked no different from the other families visiting the park that day. I started wondering what kind of secrets some of those other people carried around with them and before I knew it, I was immersed in a sea of potential enemies. Every person around me was a possible murderer, rapist, kidnapper. A woman in line at the register was complaining to anyone who would listen about the outrageous price of photographic film in the park. I turned in the direction of her voice and saw that she had a daughter about my age, standing next to her, quietly dragging her zipper up and down the front of her windbreaker. I was just beginning to imagine what secrets they might be hiding, wondering whether or not there was a husband/father and where he fit in, when I felt a hand wrap around my wrist. Before I could scream, I realized my father was pulling me out of the store, his forehead glistening with sweat, his fingers cinched tightly around my wrist.

I BRUSH THE NAPKIN SHREDS from my lap. My father looks at me from across the table and shakes his head.

We're so different, he says. So different.

AFTER MY MOTHER EXPLAINED away the Buick, my father told her that some of his buddies from the carnival would be stopping by. They arrived later that week, and my father introduced us to them.

This is my daughter Rita, he said, patting my sister on the head. She's a gymnast, and she's on the softball team, and she's taking dance lessons. And this is my other daughter. He flipped a thumb towards me. *She's an asthmatic.*

The carnies stayed with us for three weeks. They smelled pretty bad and I had seen one of them spit in our fruit salad, but for the most part, my sister and I didn't mind their presence. We had fun learning new card tricks and snooping through their backpacks.

After they left, it was decided that my mother would go back to working two jobs and my father would stay home, making preparations to launch his own landscaping business. He bought all kinds of fancy, clicking pencils and green plastic stencils with cut-outs of shrubs, trees, and flowers on them. He spent a few hours each day leaning over huge rectangles of gridded paper, carefully plotting out gardens and storefronts for his small clientele. He demanded silence while he worked, so my sister and I stayed out of his way, playing with friends outside until we heard our front door creak shut. Rubbing his eyes with one hand, holding a cigarette with the other, my father would emerge from our trailer with a half-smile on his face. He'd leave us with vague instructions to stay out of trouble and then he'd toss his cigarette on the ground and climb into the van he had bought for his new business. He'd tell us to make sure we were in the house by nightfall and then he'd disappear to MacDees for the night, his discarded cigarette still smoking in the dust.

One evening, after he pulled out of the trailer park, I went into the kitchen and carefully unrolled one of his landscaping blueprints, spreading the curled paper tight across our table. I stared in surprise at the precision of my father's work—everything neatly stencilled and labelled with painstakingly precise printing formed into exotic words like bougainvillea and hydrangea. But even beyond the scrupulous tidiness of the design, there was a sweet beauty to my father's craftsmanship, to his vision. I found myself making up colors and shapes for the plant names I didn't recognize. I imagined what it would be like to shrink down into that wonderful layout, the foliage springing to life around me while I roamed through my father's garden, marvelling all the while that he was capable of such beauty.

I remember being silently disappointed when my father threw all of his blueprints into the trash and announced, after eight months, that the business wasn't working out. This was as much of an explanation as we would ever receive. He handed the stencils to my sister and me and told us to go play.

Not long after the demise of the business, I came home from school to find my hamster cage empty. My father was in the kitchen separating the seeds from some pot in one of my jigsaw puzzle box tops. I asked him about Teddy, my hamster, and he looked up at me. His eyes were red-veined and glassy. I asked him again about Teddy, and he put his thick hand on my shoulder and told me that he had buried him in a Campbell's Cream-of-Mushroom soup can.

Because it was your favorite, he said. Not the hamster. The soup.

A few months later, my sister was digging under our trailer for a place to bury her piggy bank. She came across the soup can coffin and screamed. There were tiny claw marks on the inside of the can.

STOP IT, my father yells.

The waitress gives us a look as she sets down our dinners. My father stares at his linguine. He shakes a soft fistful of shredded Parmesan onto his plate.

You're making all of this up, he says. *I never did any of this. I was a happy drunk. Ask anyone.*

My father is near tears. He is so good at this.

BY THE TIME I was in the eighth grade, my father was back into the landscaping business, this time as an employee at a local company. During his third week on the job, a boulder rolled off of a company truck and crushed his right leg. He had to spend a lot more time around the house. We bought a special mattress for him and put it in the living room, right in front of the television. My sister and I tiptoed around him.

You can't con the con man, he would say, convinced that we were keeping all sorts of secrets from him. *You can't snow the snow man . . . You can't milk the milk man . . . You can't sand the sand man*. All the while, Zappa would be playing in the background. In between cigarettes or painkillers, my father would sing along with Frank from his mattress.

In time, he was healthy enough to limp over to his friend's place on a daily basis to get stoned. He wore an inflatable cast on his leg and used a cane, just in case anyone was watching him, plotting to take away his Worker's Compensation.

I WAS IN COLLEGE when I began telling people that my father was dead. He and my mother had been divorced for a few years, and I had discovered the coolness of silence. The last thing I said to my father was *I don't know where your Zappa albums are* and then I

simply stopped speaking to him. Even after he dried out, I refused to talk. If I answered the phone and heard his voice on the line, I hung up.

The few times he came over, I stared silently through him while his voice grew louder and louder. I felt his anger piercing my surface like bees. But I maintained my silence.

By the time I went away to school, the silence between us had grown. From that silence, the story of my father's death was born. I told people he was crushed to death by a boulder, that his ashes were in a tin can at my sister's house. It was so easy to kill my father, to tell people he was dead, to pull it off.

MY FATHER STANDS UP and leaves the restaurant. I sit at the table until the waitress comes over and asks if everything is okay.

Driving home, I think of my father's weaknesses, his failures. I can almost hear the squeal of balding tires pulling into the old trailer park. I see him stumble from the car door, eyes glazed, kinky black beard jiggling slightly in the breeze. He almost falls as he makes his way up the stairs that lead to our front door. Inside, he shakes my mother by her shoulders and slams her head into the kitchen cupboard. He calls for my sister first, then me. His voice is loud and penetrating. My bones are drenched in his coldness. My hands shake. He turns to face me and his breath is dizzying. Even now, the years spread behind me, my hands gripping the steering wheel, I can feel the old fear creeping back. I handle once again the old rage.

But I can also see him dancing across the floor, Zappa loud in the background. He shuffles back and forth while my sister giggles and skips around his legs. I sit on the sofa, watching and wanting to join in, but holding back. The music grows louder and louder. My

father reaches a hand out towards me. He asks me to dance with him. I take his hand and feel its warmth, its strength. For that one moment, I feel entirely safe and know that nothing can hurt me. I let him pull me up and the laughter comes so easily, so naturally.

At home, my son greets me at the door. He hugs my knees and shows me the pictures he and his father have drawn while I was away: blue dinosaurs and purple woolly mammoths. I take his small hand and lead him into a corner of the living room. I thumb through my father's album collection until I find what I need.

My father has only seen my son on a handful of occasions. I tell myself that this will change when my father is older, softer, when time nudges the last bit of sharpness out of his voice. But even now my body shakes, half an hour after our dinner. There are still so many pieces to sort through—I keep shaping and reshaping my image of my father like a sculptor never satisfied with her work. Just when I think I have him, a fly lands in the wet clay and when I brush him away, I accidentally rub out my father's eyes. And I can never remember exactly how they were.

On the album cover, the freak's hair has faded to a dull lavender. His skin peels away in soft cardboard flakes. It's not much, but it's all I can salvage. For now. I place the album on the turntable and aim the needle at *Peaches en Regalia*. My son smiles at me and curls up in my lap. His body is so small.

Listen to this, I say.