Words: 2197

**Braces**

Grandpa leans his round, radish pink face close, asks me to open wide and pushes a thick finger into my mouth. He yanks back my cheek like a fish on a hook and proceeds to prod at my teeth with a cold metal prong. Warm drool spills out of one corner of my mouth and cools on my cheek. Grandpa tilts the chair further back until my jaw falls open wide, slipping a tissue into my hand. As I wipe away the drool he reaches toward my back teeth, jabbing the prong into the molars. He is an arctic explorer, testing the ice.

There is a skeleton dangling in the corner. He has a metal rod sprouting out of his skull and his long arms hang loose by his sides. I try to lift my head up but the blood drains out of my skull and I feel woozy. I’ve been getting these dizzy spells lately. Mum says it is the hormones.

Next Grandpa takes a hook and begins scraping at my incisors and I feel bits of tooth sloughing off until my mouth feels like the bottom of a kettle. Finally, the chair heaves forward.

‘You have strong teeth,’ Grandpa says, handing me a plastic cupful of purple liquid. ‘A little crowded, but no fillings, yet.’

Outside the surgery is Grandpa’s living room. Dad is lying on the couch watching the Grand Prix.

‘You’re looking a bit pale,’ he says, as I pass in front of the television. ‘Everything Ok Pa?’

Grandpa hangs up his white coat in the corner and fixes his tie in the mirror, smoothing the remaining hair on his temples.

“We’ll talk about it over Lunch,” he says, moving toward the kitchen.

Dad turns the volume up on the Grand Prix and for a few minutes we watch the cars wind round the track, the engines gurgling in the Sunday silence. My eyes drift through the net curtains to the perfect green lawn that climbs upward toward Bognor beach, the sea beyond obscured by a vast rectangular hedge.

Bored, I get up and walk over to the large cabinets that run the length of one wall. Silver plates, boxes and some ornate candlesticks gleam behind glass. My favorite is a silver statue of a boxer with ‘Israeli Boxing Championship 1951’ etched on a plaque below.

‘Was Grandpa a boxer?’ I ask, but Dad is too mesmerized by the Grand Prix.

Grandpa appears in the hallway carrying a big plate of smoked Salmon. He stops and glares at us until I tap Dad on the wrist and he jumps up, rubbing his hands together, mouthing, ‘Lunchtime!’

In the dining room I lift a silver fork and feel the weight of it in my hand. We are crammed around the end of a long table, flanked by dark, old paintings on all sides.

‘I learned a new word today,’ I tell Grandpa. ‘Somnambulist. It means a sleep walker.’

‘Very good my boy,’ he says. ‘Words are good. But of course, science is better.’

‘I like Science too,’ I say.

‘Nick’s good at English,’ Dad says. ‘He writes stories’

Dad tries to tell him about one of my stories, the one about the secret gate at the end of the garden.

‘Stories are stories,’ Grandpa says. ‘It’s time for him to think about having a profession.’

‘Right, of course,’ Dad says, his face looking like when he’s been cut up at the lights.

‘I like animals,’ I say. ‘I might want to be a Vet one day.’

‘Very good,’ Grandpa nods.

‘It’s actually harder than being a Doctor,’ Dad says. ‘And if he fails that, he can always, you know, be a Dentist.’

Grandpa places his knife and fork carefully beside his plate and stands up, mopping his mouth with a napkin.

‘Or he could be an out of work actor, like his father,’ he says, turning toward the kitchen.

As Grandpa disappears, Dad grins at me across the table, signifying he has got one up on ‘the old man’ as he calls him.

When Grandpa emerges, he is gripping a big silver platter piled high with pink ham, cold beef and an assortment of salami, bread and coleslaw, that Dad would later describe as ‘straight out of a packet.’ Lumpy green Gherkins lie like sea cucumbers around the edge.

Dad and I take two round slices of ham and a gherkin each. For a while there is just the sound of cutlery clacking onto plates and the cement mixer noises of Dad and Grandpa churning ham around in their mouths.

‘The boy will need to have braces fitted,’ Grandpa says gulping another mouthful of ham and rye bread.

I picture the night my older sister came home with her new braces and I wince slightly. Her face was red with tears and she went straight up to her room. Later I saw the brace floating in a glass beside her bed; a pink plastic shield bound by silvery, twisted metal. For months she shielded her smile, cupping a hand over her mouth. She told me her teeth ached.

‘They look ok don’t they?’ Dad says, squinting at me.

‘If you want your son to grow up with crooked teeth, that is your decision,’ Grandpa says, jabbing his knife toward dad and then me. ‘You want to have crooked teeth when you’re older?’

I shake my head.

‘How do you know they won’t straighten out when he grows a bit?’ says Dad.

‘I know, because I know,’ Grandpa says, his eyes fixing Dad.

‘It’s ok,’ I say. ‘I don’t mind.’

I excuse myself from the table, and decide to spend some time outside. It is March and though the late afternoon sun appears at intervals through the clouds there is a cold wind that strays along the coast. I climb the lawn, listening to the hiss of the sea pulling back the shale. At the gate, I gaze back at the house, as an amber sun glows in the windows.

As soon as I am beyond the sight of the house I pull the cigarette and lighter I took from my Dad’s coat pocket and spark up. It’s not my first one but I’m still getting used to it. My lips sting as I pull the smoke deep into my lungs, then I splutter as it puffs out. I do this for a few more times, until I feel a buzz, then I stub it out on a pebble to save for later. Along the beach I look for washed up and wind dried remains. I run a finger over a blistered bladder wrack, stiff and black, then pick up a shard of driftwood and throw it, just to see how far I can. On the bow of an old wooden boat, piled up on bricks, a seagull lands. It pads its webbed feet and picks at its white plumage with a hooked yellow beak. If Dad were here he would probably throw a tiny pebble in to the wind to see if the seagull flew up to catch it.

Down at the water’s edge I try to skip stones but the surf is churning and each stone gets lost in a wave. I stare down the length of the beach as it curves into the distance. Millions and millions of pebbles mounting up to a long row of walls and perfect square hedges, and behind them, houses filled with people who never even go on the beach.

For a minute I think of them in their houses; watching snooker, or eating plates of hot roast chicken and beef and talking about the weather. Then I wonder how many people are standing on beaches around the world right now and how different they’re all feeling. Maybe someone in Australia is standing barefoot on a white sand beach, as the sun comes up. Maybe they’ve got a surfboard in their hand and are about to dip into the warm water, paddle out to where the waves are building, ready to ride one back to shore.

And I’m in Bognor.

Dad likes our drives down here from London. Not because he is looking forward to seeing ‘the old man’, but because it gives us a chance to talk. He’s always trying to get us to ‘bond’. I don’t mind the drive down though, and Dad has some good music. On the way here we listened to Abbey Road by the Beatles and the Joshua Tree by U2. Dad says it is good that we like the same music, as Grandpa always called anything he played ‘nonsense’. Sometimes he says things out loud that he’s thinking. Today he said, ‘I love my Father, but that doesn’t mean I have to like him.’

It’s not the first time he’s said it, either.

I wait around on the beach until the sun starts to go down and the wind gets even colder then head back up the slope, hands in pockets, churning the pebbles underfoot.

From the lawn, in the dark, I catch a glimpse of Dad and Grandpa though the window. I can tell they are having a ‘serious’ talk. Dad’s leaning on his palm, creasing the skin around one eye. Grandpa knots his hands and frequently thrusts a finger at dad, like a pistol.

Grandpa has been trying for a while to get my Dad to go back to working in his old job, the one he quit a year ago to be a full time actor.

I remember Dad told me once about a play he was in at school. Grandpa was in the audience and at the end Dad’s housemaster went up to Grandpa and said he thought Dad had ‘real talent’. He said Grandpa should think about sending Dad to drama school. Dad was really happy to find he was actually good at something, but Grandpa snubbed the housemaster and walked away without shaking his hand. The next year he moved Dad to a school that didn’t even have a drama department. I suppose that’s why Dad’s always telling me, ‘You have to go for your dreams’.

At the door Grandpa gives me a vice like handshake, then uses the claw on my neck as he leads me out to the car where Dad is sitting, all ready to go. ‘You are a good boy,’ Grandpa says, squeezing my neck a little harder. ‘Work hard now and you will have less problems later.’ I force a smile through the neck pain and hug my arms around his big, firm stomach, until I hear the engine rev that says, ‘Hurry up’.

In the car on the way home we are both silent. Dad wears driving glasses with yellow lenses that he thinks make him look cool. As the car pulls through the night I watch the orange street-light get sucked through the dark interior in waves, until I feel sick. Whenever I look across to Dad, he’s got his concentrating face on.

‘Do you like your school?’ He says eventually, without looking at me.

‘It’s ok,’ I reply.

‘I mean, do you want to stay there, or would you mind going to another school?’

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘You know money is tight, don’t you?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Look if you want to stay, we’ll find a way of paying. It’s just..’

‘Whatever, Dad.’

‘It’s not me, your honor.’ Dad says, holding his hands up in a not guilty pose. ‘You know what Grandpa is like with money. It comes with, conditions.’

‘What’s he asked for?’

‘Look I shouldn’t really be talking to you about this. I should talk to Mum first.’

‘What’s he asked for, Dad?’

Dad grips his fingers tighter on the wheel. ‘He wants you to choose all sciences next year, and he’ll only pay if you get A grades.’

‘Really?’ I say.

‘You can always go to the comprehensive.’

‘And lose all my friends?’

Dad pulls on to the motorway, slips across the lanes.

‘I’ll never get all A Grades,’ I say.

Dad sighs, ‘Life’s not easy, you know. THAT IS WHY YOU MUST HAVE A PROFESSION.’ This last bit he says in a robot voice.

As the car drifts through the night, I start thinking about Grandpa’s request and how fathers always seem to want to make their sons do what they want them to. Even Dad does it. He wants me to read books and be ‘creative’ like him. He doesn’t force it down my throat like Grandpa does, but I’m kind of like a fish in his tank and he is making sure the water is the exact temperature he likes.

As we come to the ‘halfway’ roundabout, I slip my headphones over my ears and listen to the only tape Dad won’t let me play out loud, because it’s rap and because ‘it’s abrasive.’

Then I shut my eyes and picture that beach in Australia; The soft white sand between my toes, the sun rising before me, the salt in my hair. And as the blue surf rolls beneath my board, I see myself pushing out, beyond the building waves, out into the ocean beyond.