

# The art of being my father's daughter

When the talented son of my father, the artist, passed away in September 2001, the fear of upsetting my dad paralyzed me. It took a spate of bad luck, three Father's Days and one night in France with him to remember how to be a daughter again.

BY EMILY URQUHART

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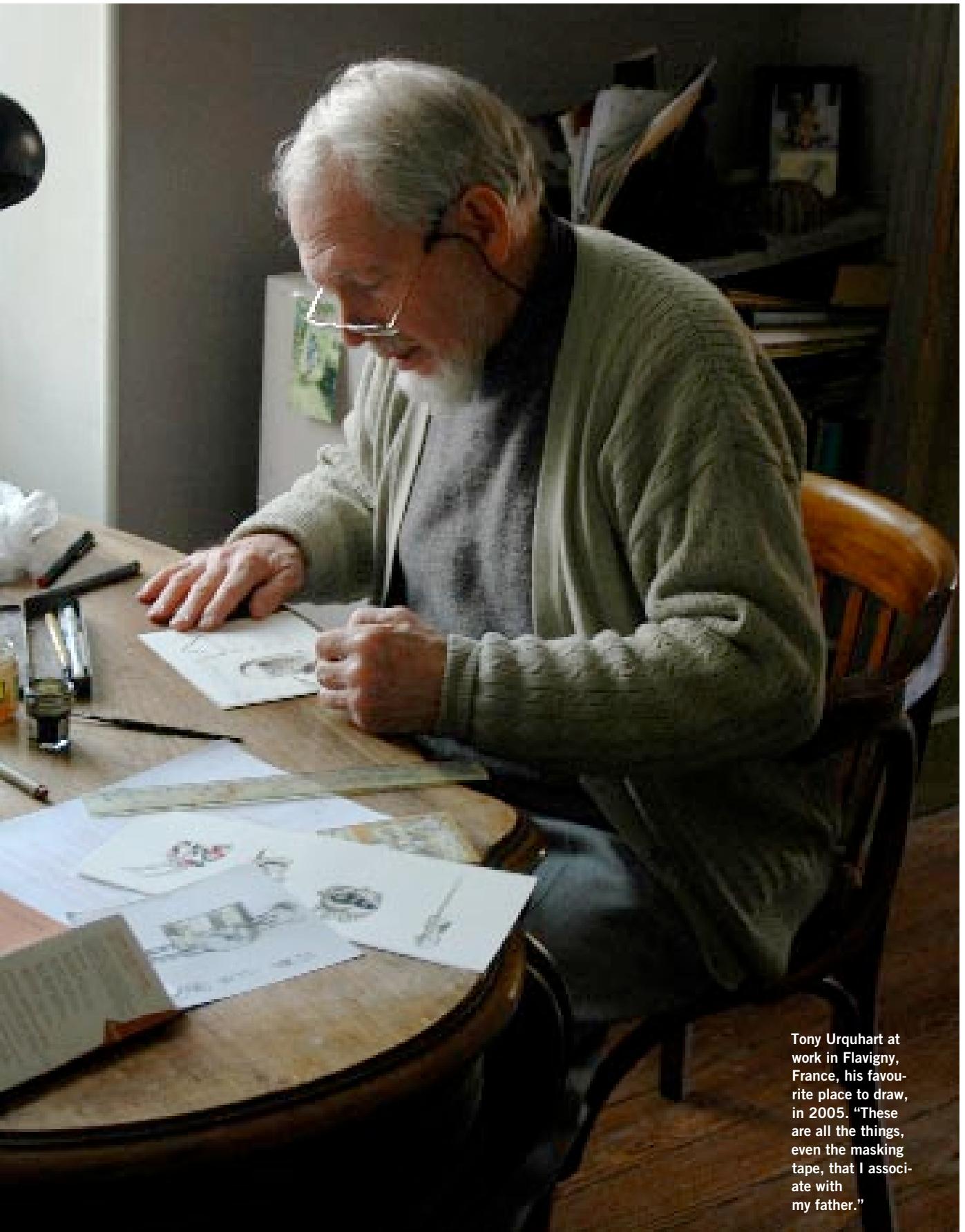
The room is stuffed with earnest-faced art students wearing name tags, seeking their benefactors in order to thank them in person. It's the second time I've accompanied my father to this annual event, and given how many scholarship winners turn up at the Ontario College of Art and Design's awards ceremony, I suspect attendance is mandatory.

Still, the fear that the student designated to receive the scholarship in my late brother's name isn't in the room makes me stiff with anxiety. It's unlikely that my father will dwell on the absence for any length of time. But the idea of his disappointment is paralyzing.

The previous ceremony had a funereal feel and I swore I'd never return, but when my father asked me to join him again this year, I couldn't say no. The first recipient was a young woman. This year's winner is also female – a relief. If it were a boy, comparisons would be inevitable.

My father, white-haired, wearing a white suit-coat, follows me through the crowd sipping Chardonnay while I >





Tony Urquhart at work in Flavigny, France, his favourite place to draw, in 2005. "These are all the things, even the masking tape, that I associate with my father."

scan name tags. He wants to meet the recipient of the Marsh Urquhart Memorial Scholarship, but she's difficult to find in the crush of students. I ask a boy in a rumpled sweater if he knows the person I'm looking for, and he does. He went to high school with her. She's just over there, the small one with the dark hair. I'm relieved, but still tense.

I introduce her to my father. He shakes her hand and inquires about her work. I interject with jokes and benign questions whenever I detect a hint of impending silence or discomfort from either party. When I think she's had enough, I make a move to end the conversation with an off-hand comment about dinner reservations. After everyone has said goodbye, I usher my father through the crowd and out into the early evening light. We find a restaurant, where we talk about art, my brother and how nice it was to meet the scholarship student. We've gotten through it again, and I'm off-duty for another 12 months.

#### FEBRUARY 2004

I imagine my parents in the kitchen of their Stratford, Ont., home, quietly discussing my future. My mother has pulled one of the brightly coloured chairs away from the table and sits beside the telephone while my father lingers by the back door. They finish speaking and my father slips quietly out into the late afternoon. There is a light snowfall, so he leaves tracks as he walks down towards the river with the intention of looping back once he reaches the frozen bank.

Inside the house, my mother is holding the receiver of the telephone and dialling the international code and seven numbers that follow. The first two calls don't go through. On the third try, she reaches me in my apartment in Kiev, Ukraine, where I've lived for five months while working for an English-language newspaper. I pick up on the first ring because I'm expecting the call.

"Your father couldn't tell you this himself," she says.

"But he feels that terrible things are happening to you in that country, and he wants you to know that if you need to come home, he will buy you a plane ticket right away."

The previous evening, after growing tired of a party at the U.S. Marine House – with its large relief sculpture of Lenin eyeing the American-style saloon bar opposite – I'd decided to go back to the apartment.

Shortly after the cab dropped me off, I was walking through the archway that leads into my giant, Soviet-style building complex when a man approached me and firmly grabbed my hand. I don't know what he said to me and I don't ever want to know. I struggled, and the white mitt I was wearing came off in his hand, freeing me. Just as I turned to run, I was knocked off my feet and dragged into the unlit archway by a previously unseen accomplice.

They kicked me in the ribs and the head, and were trying to reach the purse that was looped tightly across my chest. I made the task increasingly difficult by kicking back, screaming and biting, but eventually the more brutal of the two threw me onto my stomach and, quite swiftly and daintily, lifted

the bag from around my shoulders. They ran off into the night, leaving me lying in a snowdrift with no house keys, no money and no identification.

I picked myself up and stumbled into a nearby café where the night cleaning staff let me use the telephone over and over again until my roommates returned from the party. By the following morning, I found that walking was made almost impossible by the spike of pain that shot up from my tailbone with each step.

The assault and ensuing injury, which had prompted the phone call, were the final pieces of bad luck that had been relayed to my father via my mother. Earlier that week, my ex-boyfriend – who I had lived with in Toronto and Vancouver – hacked into my email inbox and found a particularly humiliating passage from >



The author and her father in Flavigny in 1981. "At that age, his shoulders were my preferred mode of transport."

my private messages to cut-and-paste and send back to me with his own comments. He found a second outlet for his rage in creating a thinly veiled hate-site directed at me. And, finally, to go with what I believed was a broken tailbone, I'd also recently suffered a broken heart from a more recent relationship – the details of which were never passed on to my father, God willing, by my mother. But I think he had a pretty good idea.

My mother is the medium through which our family channels all unpleasant information, whether it originates with me, her stepchildren or my father. It is a gloomy but nevertheless crucial role.

Statements like “No, we cannot pay for your [insert: divorce, wedding, mortgage, weird art project, trip to Tallinn]” and “Your child has decided not to pursue [insert: higher education, a birth control method, a career]” are part of her repertoire of communications.

And there are many of us to communicate with. Describing my blended family reminds me of those logic problems from math class involving two trains travelling at different speeds. When my mother met my father, he was already a successful painter, lumped in with a colourful group of artists from London, Ontario, who were being written about in art magazines and *The Globe and Mail*. She was 24 and he was 40, a divorcee with four children. My oldest (half-) sister was 17 when I was born. My oldest (quarter-) nephew is 25 (he is four years my junior) and my youngest (quarter-) niece is one. I am the youngest sibling of five and also an only child. I exist because those two trains (my parents) passed each other on the tracks at a specific moment in time and collided.

**I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE HOW MY MOTHER** described the events of that week in February 2004, but my father saw my surroundings as the source of my troubles.

Maybe he believed that this spate of bad luck could have been avoided if I'd stayed in Vancouver, or if I'd been offered a job in Paris instead of Kiev. If I could have nursed a broken heart and dealt with cyber-terrorism while strolling in Le Jardin du Luxembourg, life would be bearable. If I'd been attacked in those gardens by, say, Pierre and François behind the Medici Fountain, as opposed to Igor and Yuri in a Stalinist archway, I might have put my years of French lessons to good use and reasoned with the two thugs. It was important to my father that I learn to speak the language of the country that has entranced him for nearly 50 years, so I slogged through French grammar from the age of five, but Russian, Ukrainian – those languages were entirely new to both of us.



**Tony and Emily Urquhart work on a print together in Toronto in 1984. “It still hangs on my office wall.”**

On the telephone, I am still absorbing my father's indirect request that I should come home when my mother delivers his final message: “He also wants you to know that he loves you,” she says, before the line fills with static and the connection is broken for a third time.

**MY FATHER GREW UP** in a funeral home on Main Street near the corner of Lundy's Lane in Niagara Falls. His mother, grandmother and maid overfed and overcared for him and his younger brother. His parents sold the family funeral business, as they did not want their two boys bearing the burden of the dead. Tony, my dad, drew at night while listening to radio soap operas, and in his teens earned himself a place at the Albright Art School in Buffalo. Although he chose art over the funeral business, death is a constant theme in his work – from his enormous gravesite paintings of the early '80s to his recent skull-and-bone sketches.

During his twenties and early thirties, my father lived in London, Ont., with his schoolteacher wife and their four children. He had a job teaching art at the University of Western Ontario, and his career as an artist was going well. I think it was a happy time, and certainly in the artful black and white photos of my siblings as children, it looks light-filled, with few dark shadows.

It didn't last. I don't know at exactly what point their life together began to deteriorate or what role my father played in the destruction of that relationship. I do know that his first wife was an alcoholic and that she started drinking at a late stage in their 14-year marriage.

**IN THE EARLY '70S**, a judge decided that my two brothers would stay with their mother in London, so my two sisters moved with my father to Waterloo, Ont., >

where he had secured a teaching job at the university. My mother, a young widow, entered their life a few years later. I followed early one morning on a sunny day in February 1977, just 10 months after my parents were married.

Our first house was a cacophony of fighting teenaged girls (the bedrooms), pontificating male artists (the living room) and a demented dog made further crazy by my brothers' weekend torments (attic, kitchen, bedrooms, living room and yard).

Three floors down, in the dank and musty basement, was the mysterious world of my father's studio. Ten-foot paintings were propped against the staircase, acting as a flimsy railing. The smell of turpentine and oil paints drifted up through the ventilation system. Tubes of paint were lined neatly along Plexiglas palletes, where he mixed colours for his sculptures and small triptychs.

The older children were allowed to work alongside my father in the studio, and so when my brothers visited on weekends they disappeared down into the basement for hours. At that point, my teenaged sisters were too wild and boy crazy to care for our father's strange cave of creativity.

I can remember a great sense of unease while sitting with our dog, Buffer, at the top of the basement stairs, listening to the harried sounds of classical music and the occasional words of encouragement from my father about my brothers' work. Because both of us (I was five at the time) were barred from joining this club, we were all the more determined to creep down those stairs and spy on its members.

Buffer slipped down whenever someone left the door open and I would stay on the top two stairs, hidden behind the canvases, just to listen. But once I pushed too close trying to get a better look, and came crashing down along with one of the large oil paintings.

I spent a good deal of my youth in French cemeteries, peering into the open graves that my father found so inspirational while he sat on his little blue fold-out chair, sketching, and envisioning the immense paintings that would eventually turn into a well-known series called *The Thresholds*.

You have never seen pure and simple joy until you spend a few minutes watching my father sketch. This can happen in his studio – now a small, house-like structure that takes up the entire square footage of my

parents' backyard – or in a rental car parked in the French countryside during a torrential downpour. His work ethic is tremendous and his rapture is palpable. Each of his children, and in turn his grandchildren, possesses an aptitude – if not exactly a talent – in visual art. However, my brothers, with their early lessons in the musty basement studio, are the ones that shone. My eldest brother, Marsh, in particular, was a great draftsman and the only one among us to inherit my father's precise eye and the ability to create impossibly perfect lines. Marsh was my father's greatest achievement, and in the end, also his greatest failure.

**MARSH WAS SENSITIVE**, too caring, crushed by worry and apprehension, but he was also pragmatic and organized. There was a constant battle between the two sides of his character.

He must have started drinking as a teenager in London, when he and my second brother, Aidan, still lived with their mother. He moved to Toronto after high school to attend what was then the Ontario College of Art, where he produced an impressive body of work, in both volume and talent.

I've heard my father say that Marsh was simply waiting to make his name in the art world, waiting for our father's own impressive career to die (with him, I suppose) before arriving on the scene. It would be like Marsh, held back by patience and a fear of intruding, but I don't believe that was the case.

His talent deteriorated as steadily as his life. Instead of a signature, Marsh drew a caricature of himself to sign letters. It was a quick portrait of his black fringe, thick moustache and round glasses, but it was a perfect likeness. As his drinking grew heavier, this caricature changed. The glasses were askew, the moustache sparse and his mouth reduced to one simple line.

Through his drinking, he lost his girlfriend and then, much later, his job and, finally, in September 2001, his life. Not in a bar fight, or an accident. At 36 years of age, my brother died of alcoholism.

Throughout the year before my brother's death, my father lightly, and then strongly, suggested that Marsh check into a rehabilitation clinic. After a great struggle, the two of them visited a centre in Guelph, where the clinic facilitator looked at the yellowing whites of my brother's eyes and told him that his liver was >

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failing and he'd be dead by the end of the year.

My brother refused to consider rehabilitation, and he and our father quarrelled in the car on the way home. After that, my father backed off for a while, but Marsh was constantly on his mind.

During this time, I was living in Toronto and my father made frequent trips to the city. We would meet at my apartment and then visit the galleries on Queen Street West, followed by a look at the latest Art Gallery of Ontario show, and afterwards we would eat lunch at one of the little restaurants on Baldwin Street. Over the course of the meal, the conversation always led to my brother. These were sad and uncomfortable talks and I inevitably changed the subject.

We had one of these lunches on the day in late September that Marsh died, although we didn't hear about my brother's death until after six that evening. We ate at a corner table in a small Italian restaurant and we spoke about the recent terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

"What do you think Marsh would say about this?" my father asked me. In recent days, my brother wasn't leaving his Etobicoke, Ont. apartment. No one knew how he passed his time, but we did know that he was drinking.

"He's probably been watching those towers fall over and over on television all week," my father said.

"Maybe," I said, and changed the subject. Five hours later, my mother telephoned to tell me that my brother was dead.

Less than a day later, I am at my parents' home in Stratford, Ont. I sit in an armchair, staring out our front window, waiting for my father to return. He received the phone call while staying at a hotel in St. Catharines, Ont., two hours away, the night before, but he waits until morning to drive home. With a gripping horror, I believe that my father will die on the highway as he drives with the terrible knowledge of my brother's death permeating the car. Even after he returns safely, but of course damaged, I can't shake this feeling. The concern I have for my father is compounded by a sorrow so thick I can taste it. Over the next few days, flowers and baked goods arrive at the door and are left to rot where they rest. There is a new and heavy silence in the air. It's enough to say life changed after that.

I leave for Toronto a week later. I want to stay at



**Tony and Marsh Urquhart in Toronto in 1984. "I like this photo because my dad is giving Marsh's work such careful consideration."**

home with my father, but my mother ushers me out the door and onto the night train with no chance of saying goodbye to him.

I come home on weekends and lie around listlessly on the living-room couches. I watch my father for signs. Of what? I don't know. We sit at the table together one afternoon and he tells me, "Marsh was the most talented of all of my children." But I don't mind. Such is the lot of the dead, to be absolved of their siblings' envy.

A few months pass and I plan an uplifting trip to my father's favourite country. Together, we will visit the art galleries in Paris and travel to Lourdes (where he likes to draw the crutches left behind by cripples hoping for a miracle cure), and finally to Flavigny, in the Burgundy region of France, where we'd lived the year that I was four. But France is dreary in February, and we both catch cold.

Six months later, when I need to make a decision about moving to Vancouver, I wonder if it's too soon to leave; it's only a little more than a year since my brother's death. But I go, and from there I venture even further and get a job in Ukraine, a country where the phone lines are dodgy and a visit requires bribes, lies and an expensive visa. The distance helps.

As the years pass, I reserve my father-fretting for certain occasions, specifically when the scholarship is awarded in my brother's name at his alma mater. I would skip the ceremony just to avoid the stress, but thinking of my father there alone in the crowds of students, seeking out the scholarship recipient to con-

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gratulate him or her, is way worse.

I can't help worrying about my father; it is somehow innate and uncontrollable. But in the end, as natural order dictates, I still need him more than he needs me. Here is why I believe this is true.

When my contract with the Kyiv newspaper finished, in an effort to prolong the transition back to Canada, I decided to return to Flavigny and stay there for several weeks. My father had made his annual pilgrimage to France, and although our dates only connected for a day, he'd agreed to meet my flight to Lyon so we could spend one night together in our former home.

It had been more than a year since I had last seen my dad, and in that time his hair had turned snow white. He was thinner, too, dwarfed by a tweed suit coat bought in another, heavier period of his life. But at 71, he looked great. Healthy and red-faced, his eyes, bright blue, twinkled when he caught sight of me at the arrivals gate. I thought to myself, "No one in my life will ever be as happy to see me as my father."

He took the heavier of my two bags, and we walked through the cavernous space of the Lyon airport, past the train station and out into the parking lot to the

rental car, a Peugeot, his favourite make.

He started the car and a symphony blared from the CD player. He reached forward to turn down the volume, as I always request when riding in his cars, but I told him to leave the music playing.

We had a three-hour ride ahead of us and only one day together before he returned to Canada. Tomorrow, he would have to turn around and do this drive again. I had so much to tell my father about the last year, but as we pulled out of the parking lot and onto the auto-route, my mind was at rest. I was suddenly incredibly tired, and although I fought to stay awake, the fatigue was overwhelming. In that place between sleep and consciousness, it struck me that for the first time since I had left Canada, I felt safe. After months of struggle, heightened awareness and stress, I was able to relax. The symphony rose, reaching a crescendo, and just before I closed my eyes I knew that I had

"Portrait of the Artist as Father" by Emily Urquhart from the upcoming anthology, *The First Man in My Life*, edited by Sandra Martin, to be published by Penguin Group (Canada) in May 2007.

found my way home. ●

When the talented son of my father, the artist, passed away in 2001, the fear of upsetting my dad paralyzed me. It took a spate of bad luck, three Father's Days and one car ride in France with him to remember how to be a daughter again.

