

Inside the Book

AN EXCERPT

On this February night, my father is a bag of bones lying on his side under a thin hospital blanket. He is seventy-eight, and his kidneys are failing. His cheeks are sunken and his limbs spindly, like those of an awkward teen in a growth spurt. My fingers, long and thin like his, could encircle his leg. Without his glasses, he squints at the 2002 Olympic figure skaters on a television suspended awkwardly from the ceiling. He peers out at me—his small, near-sighted eyes the blue of robin eggs—from a long face whiskered in white, and he attempts the crooked grin I barely remember.

"I liked that ballet, you know," he says.

Only he doesn't say ballet the usual way, *baallay*. He says the *baal* part like *ball*, as in basketball, the only sport he ever mentioned playing. I don't understand what he means at first, so I have to ask. Twice. He gestures at the graceful movements on the screen and explains that as a teenager he used to travel from Pelican Rapids, the small northern Minnesota town where he grew up, to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Where he saw "the ballet, you know."



Catherine Madison

I didn't know this. I have never heard this before. I can't even imagine this.

In my mind he is ten feet tall with a fist like a piston and a voice like Zeus. Perched on a pedestal of medical skill and military might, he commanded our family with high standards and harsh discipline. He went to war and returned a hero. But he declined to cheer our victories from high school bleachers, celebrate our report card As, or say *I love you* out loud. He reminded us often that we were just like

everyone else—he loathed pomp and pretense—yet he stood alone and apart. He used force and fear to push us to be stronger, try harder, aim higher, to survive when someone else might not. Behind his back we call him Colonel Surgeon Father God.

He is my father, but I cannot hug him the way a daughter should. Not now, not the last time I saw him when I spent fewer than twenty-four hours at his house two years ago, and not since I was old enough to know what it means to hug your dad. When I try, he stands ramrod straight, his feet slightly turned out, his hands dangling from skinny arms held close to his sides, his jaw set. I can reach my arms around him, which in recent years I have mustered up the courage to try, but he is like a flagpole. Cold, hard, upright. A patriot, stilled.

—Modified from the prologue of *The War Came Home with Him*