

# FRONT PORCH

## Man in Backseat of '73 Plymouth Duster

John E. Barrett

*"Why must a man keep standing like a shepherd,  
exposed, in such an overflow of power,  
so much a part of this event-filled landscape  
that if he were to lean back against a tree trunk  
he would complete his destiny, forever. . ."*

*"The Spanish Trilogy"  
Rainer Maria Rilke*

Daniel Youngsman carved Sally Nestico's initials into his forearm with a razor blade; scars already zigzagged all the way up his arm. Each new girlfriend appeared like another suicide attempt, more than a dozen girls, captured and preserved, until they slithered into his white T-shirt sleeve. Previous letters had closed in on themselves like puckered but unkissable lips.

I envied him.

The joke circulating around the playground, a joke Daniel himself had proudly launched, was that soon he'd have to start on his other arm. He was running out of skin.

At recess, a handful of Colfax Junior High students gathered around Daniel as he performed this ritual beneath the sawdust-flecked wood shop windows. The ring of students protected him from the view of the monitor, Mr. Cohen, who spent the time lazily pitching a pink kickball. Daniel bled little, a small bubble quivering at the blade's edge until he finished his life-or-death work. I don't remember him ever disciplined or hospitalized; the teachers had written him off once he completed seventh grade—twice. He was short and small, but he had black whiskers hooking his chin; his biceps looked as if they were packed with sand.

A man before his time.

I hated my flimsy, girlish arms, the hairs as scarce as blue jay feathers in the schoolyard grass. I hated their white, virginal appearance, the muscles mushy as Mom's leftover spaghetti. At twelve, I had yet to hold any girl's hand voluntarily, and wouldn't have an actual girlfriend until I turned seventeen. I lacked the primal, cave-dwelling authority that Daniel radiated.

I stared. *What did the scars feel like?—bumpy pimples? stringy stitches? subtly smooth bruises?* I wondered if I'd learn anything by running my fingers over them, as if attempting to read a secret version of Braille, a language that uncovered how to become a man.

At sixteen, I wanted a bicycle. Both my brothers had Schwinn ten-speed racers. My best friend Glenn had a twelve-speed, metallic yellow model. Every morning Glenn rode past my house as I started my four-block trek to the bus stop, brown lunch bag in hand. "See you at school," he'd yell, standing up off the seat, posing briefly, then whirring out of sight.

Mom explained that we didn't have the money, adding hopefully, "I thought you liked the bus?" Then, after seeing my bratty frown, she said, "I'm sure one of your brothers will let you borrow theirs."

*Yeah, right.* Mike, two years older, rode all day long, and whenever I asked him he'd say he was just about to take another turn. Terry, four years older and a foot taller, owned the largest bike, the pedals well out of my reach.

"But I want my own bike."

Bike, for me, meant one step closer to Car, to Man, but I didn't know how to explain this to her. I looked pleadingly over at Ray, my stepfather, and he simply nodded, continuing to polish a silver spoon from an antique set he'd recently salvaged. His stony hands bore whitened calluses. Purplish-black burn marks, some as large as dimes, marked his lower arms and upper chest, the result of sparks flying off blow-torched steel. Since he worked in demolition, he had access to abandoned things. I remember the half-dozen crystal, faceted teardrops he'd salvaged off an old Park Avenue hotel chandelier, each as big as my hand and heavier than a brick. He'd sometimes bring us small, funny-shaped tables, hard-seated chairs with spindled backs, marble bathroom tiles, tins rattling full of nails and screws and brackets in all sizes, which he deposited onto the crowded workbench in our basement for some unknown future use.

This weekend Ray stayed over, as he often did. He also spent part of each holiday with us—the other with his actual children somewhere on New York City's Upper West Side, or maybe it was Brooklyn. I never paid much attention to these details. I mostly treated him like a neighbor or family friend, a Backstage Man. I became Ray's assistant when he cooked, unclogged the lawnmower, fiddled with the car, painted bookshelves, or rewired an old lamp. My brothers seemed indifferent to his whereabouts or activities, maybe because they were older and busy managing complicated social calendars.

Ray parked Mom's car at the curb and worked in the garage all Sunday morning, the roll-down door and basement door firmly closed. I heard the drill, metal tools clattering on cement, sounds echoing in the bay.

Mom asked me to refill her glass of Pepsi. She often complained that she was "too tired to budge." She worked two jobs, as a leasing agent for the Ford dealership, and as a real estate salesperson. On weekends, she watched television, mostly game shows and black-and-white movies. After I fetched her drink, she told me to check on Ray, see if he wanted help. I knocked on the basement door. "Thirsty? I can get you some seltzer."

"Busy." That's all he said.

Not curious enough to plot an intrusion yet, I grabbed my glove and went outside to pitch a tennis ball endlessly against the curb, inventing nine-inning games, out by out. When it became too dark, line drives hitting me on the wrist instead of landing safely in the glove, I went inside the house, the garage forgotten until Ray shouted my name.

I rushed down, taking the steps two at a time, shouldering into the wall. I pushed open the door and slid a little on a grainy oil stain.

He kicked out the kickstand. "Not bad, eh?"

A white frame. Black handlebars wrapped in duct tape. Purplish seat. White-walled tires that seemed too short, too thick. Gear shifts in strange places, down by the chain. No logos or stripes or "Schwinn" painted anywhere. A clumsy generator headlight crouched on handlebars that were pocked-marked with rust; all the chrome was rusty.

"I wanted yellow."

Ray pushed passed me on his way inside, wiping his hands on a shop towel. "Hey, it works."

I crossed the garage away from Ray's bike and rolled Terry's Schwinn out of the corner, lifted myself awkwardly onto the crossbar, unable to sit on the high seat. I imagined Glenn's cruel laughter and resolved never to ride the Frankenstein bike. I put Terry's bike away, then moved the white bike to an opposite corner and left it untested for about a week. Eventually I rode it around the neighborhood, on streets where my friends, the few I had, did not live.

Mom chided me to thank Ray, and I may have given him a half-hearted hug after dessert. I went to bed brooding, perhaps angry, thinking about this creation of his, constructed in the same way he had built and rebuilt our household, in dinners and lamps, gadgets and furniture, as if Ray knew the ingredients, knew he could fashion a better bike—a *better family, a better boy, a better man*—by transforming scrap into sculpture.

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On one of my bogus sick days, bored, finished with yet another horror paperback, this one with feral cats, I searched my mom's closet. In other furtive searches of the house, I had failed to find any family photos that included Dad. I found no evidence of his life *with any of us* before he left when I was just five. I had no memory of him in the house—his voice, his face, his presence. So my search for him continued ever since I discovered, many years before, proof of his actual existence: His likeness on three album covers hidden beneath decaying letters, two-tone Christmas cards, and scratchy, dust-laden 45s in a broken attic box. I'd try to animate the four posing, smiling figures by tilting them in the light, but the flat surface, the glossy flimsiness, continuously left me with only Colorform characters I couldn't rearrange. Dad seemed to be the tallest among the group, his high forehead like a marquee awaiting a message.

He also had monstrous ears jutting away from his head. Like mine.

Mom grudgingly confirmed my findings. Apparently, my father sung for a fifties vocal group, The Crew Cuts. Apparently, he had fame once. (And so did Mom, she quickly added; she had danced on Broadway with Tony Bennett! Who, Mom?) But even though I sometimes sat with these covers on my lap, fingering his chin; even though I sometimes played the LPs and 45s on a white, hard plastic, portable record player, Osmond Brothers stickers adorning its sides, the performer himself never did come to life in the too-slow sounds:

*"Sh-Boom, Sh-Boom, yadada yadada yadadada. . .  
Life could be a dream, sweetheart,  
Hello hello again, Sh-Boom and hoping we'll meet again, Boom, Sh-Boom. . ."*

*"Earth Angel, Earth Angel,  
the one I adore,  
love you forever, and evermore,  
I'm just a fool, a fool in love with you. . ."*

Mom offered little by way of personal liner notes. Her memory sputtered. She carried on with family affairs as if Dad had never existed, as if I hadn't asked about him then, or a few minutes, days, years later. He came up once in awhile in a curse about alimony and child support.

So, determined, I tried to restore him somehow, give him *movement*.

That sick day, I foraged through Mom's dirty clothes piled in a heap on the floor, initially thinking I would wash her laundry—not one of my normal chores—and surprise her. After all, she had bought the thermometer-heated-by-light-bulb trick again, without complaint. As I separated *dry clean only* from *wash warm with like colors*, white blouses from lavender ones, pants from blazers with Mom's Century 21 pin branding a wrinkled lapel, a metal canister clanged to the floor and wobbled like a giant coin.

Inside I discovered a reel-to-reel film. *A home movie*. I felt a thrilling energy. *Was my father here, finally, in action?*

After an hour-long search, I finally found the projector, tucked on the highest shelf in a far corner. I extracted it from the bag; the aluminum casing sparkled like Christmas foil. It took me another hour or so of fumbling and threading and reading elaborate diagrams before I got the machine working.

I closed the curtains and aimed the small beam of light at Mom's blank television screen.

The movie began as a series of flickering squares, and I panicked: *there's nothing recorded*. But suddenly an image came into view, and I spent the next few seconds focusing. A woman in a rush to undress, tossing clothes off as I imagined Mom must do, next to this closet, after a twelve-hour day. Once naked, she sat on the bed and leaned back onto her elbows, stifling a yawn. Her breasts, small and symmetrical, hung gracefully, the only graceful thing about her. Black, tousled hair kept falling in front of her face and she'd sling it back with a quick jerk of her head, as if spitting into the air. She waited, eyeing the door.

There were no blankets or sheets on the mattress. No other furniture in the room.

Naturally, I had seen naked women before. My Uncle had a stack of *Playboys* from the sixties that he stored in an attic dresser at my grandparents' house. This woman, however, was different. The flesh on her hips jiggled when she yanked the shirt over her head. Lines rippled below her eyes. Pimple marks blotched her chin. Gaps between her teeth. I wondered what could possibly be on *her* list of favorite things.

A man, already nude, walked in, his chest hairless, his penis erect. Massive. I thought, first: *God*. Then: *ouch*. The sputtering close-up mandated comparison. I touched myself, outlined beneath denim, measuring with a bent knuckle as Ray had shown me on wood, guessing length without ruler. *One-inch, two-inch, three. . . six, sixish*, returning to the base, again, up, *six, six, sixish, seven. . .* I felt sissy—Ray's word. I remained concealed under the thick jeans, grateful for the disguise.

The man, the woman, fell together. From the start, the man took control, forcing the woman into seemingly awkward, painful positions. For long intervals, she knelt while he stood. Otherwise, he flattened her with his weight, or yanked fistfuls of hair, maneuvering her like a mannequin. Once, smiling her gap-toothed smile, she clawed his back with her nails until he responded with dominance, pinning her wrist behind her head. The movie played on in silence.

I watched this short film—ten minutes?—many times. In the beginning, I rubbed myself, searching for the right rhythm, the pleasure mysteriously unpleasurable. But by the last few screenings I stopped participating, no longer fascinated, or comfortable. I felt shell-shocked and bewildered.

Bewildered, mostly, by my mother's ownership, her complicity.

The film belonged to *her*. I pictured my mother entering a store with loud signs and tinted windows. Surely not in our town of Wayne, New Jersey, but probably in Paterson, off a dark, scary neighborhood sidewalk, glass slivers stuck to her heels. I witnessed her reclining on the bed, a bag of Rold Gold pretzels crinkled open at her side, smiling or nodding or whatever, as she watched this home movie, this man and woman having sex.

*Did she imagine Dad then, gripping her hair? Or Ray? Did she and Ray...? I never saw them kiss on the lips.... Never.*

Ending, the film snapped off the reel like a blown tire. I repackaged everything with care and returned it to its private space, covering the box in layer after layer after layer of discarded clothing, as if I were a toddler again, playing dress-up in pirate gear, a soundtrack of plaintive fifties love songs spinning in the background.

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On my cluttered childhood dresser teetered a model ship, the size of a lamp, the first serious construction project I'd undertaken since graduating from Legos and Lincoln Logs. I failed miserably. The masts drunkenly tilted fore and aft; holes riddled the hull. The sails, embossed with skull and crossbone, hung limply like spent balloons. Parts were missing; I'd thrown them out in frustration, trays of dangling plastic pieces. I pried plastic loose from gluey fingertips that smelled like Vicks Vapor Rub for days.

I imagined it seaworthy, however, in moments of inspiration, breaking waves, spouting foam. I, the Captain, commanded a fleet of swarthy pirate-clad G.I. Joes. I barked orders in a deep, resonating voice. I loved shouting, “Swab the deck!” I loved simulating sword—and fistfights.

We went on many journeys, treasure hunts, naturally, to all the seas on Mom’s miniature Globe—Indian, Caspian, Red, Dead. Frequently, we encountered teenage girls in danger, flapping their arms to gain our attention and assistance. I bowed to them, gestured with my sword to my men who jumped into the drink, slaying the sharks, wrestling the Loch Ness, cradling a grateful damsel.

One night, with Mom sleeping next door, I continued a voyage in my mind’s eye as I lay down to sleep, seeing a girl in a ponytail, sweetly smiling as she flailed, shark fins cutting the surface near her. She called on me, the Captain, to save her. I bravely walked the plank, dove off its end, splashing into gentle waves that swaddled me like bath water. My sword unsheathed, at the ready. But the girl had vanished. The sharks, gone. I strained to see her somewhere, bobbing; I swung my arm outward, back and forth, in a desperate search. The water roiled, suddenly turbulent, alive, and I struggled to stay afloat. The ship rose above me, a wall of dense shadow, and I sank deeper, water filling my throat. I shook myself awake, tears brimming, heart racing. No one ever taught me how to fight. No one ever taught me how to swim. No one ever taught me how to save.

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In our living room, centered above a soft-cushioned sofa, hung a painting of a bullfight: the Matador’s red cape caught in mid-swirl, his right hand wielding a long blade that plunged halfway into the creature’s bloodied skull. His clothing was like armor, but sleek, lightweight, adorned in spiral galaxies of silver thread. The pants flared over black shoes, hiding all but the squared-off toe. The Matador glowered in triumph.

Mom said, “John, you’re not really serious about Amy, are you?”

I stared. But not at Mom as she attempted to talk sense into her lovesick seventeen-year-old son, swooning over his first steady girl. I stared instead at the Matador, a staple of my adolescent surroundings, an image I’d traced with wet fingers—for the squeak—and washable crayons—for the fake blood. The scene was painted on glass tiles, the reflections giving the Matador a fluid, graceful 3D mobility. Not like album Dad, his swoon and swagger faked and flat. Not like Ray’s blustery bulk, his gait clumsy and thunderous.

“I like her, Mom.”

“You’re in high school. You just met.”

She sympathized, she said. She begged caution, maturity. “During courtship, your father sent me a dozen roses every week for a year. Grandmother asked him to stop because the house started looking like a funeral parlor.”

Mom surprised me with this swatch of Dad memory, but, at that moment, I didn’t care for *his* story—I wanted to escape interrogation, not suddenly engage in a mission to contact the missing link.

I was my own man.

She repeated, “A funeral parlor.”

“Yes. I get it.” I grabbed the remote.

She took it back before I could turn the television on. “You’re not thinking about marriage, are you?”

“Mom! Give me a break!”

She pulled on my right ear, gently, and held it for a beat before releasing me.

I stood and checked my watch. She didn't take the bait, and opened her mouth to continue but I cut her off. "Mom, look."

She turned to the painting.

I asked, partially to change subjects, partially to satisfy an old curiosity: "Why matadors?"

"Oh, I don't know. I like them."

"Obviously." We also had a three-foot sculpture of one on the carpeted first-floor landing.

She paused. "He's a man."

Yes. "What do you mean?" She had me hooked. But she offered nothing more.

*What do you mean?*

The television snapped on. She shrugged her shoulders and patted mine. I took a step, turned to leave, when Mom said, fiercely, as if on the attack, as if I'd done something terribly wrong, "She's not the only girlfriend you will ever have."

Roses rained down on the Matador from unseen women in the crowd, the admirers, the slaves of romance, the willing victims, and he stood, virtuous, amid thorns poised to score his flesh in glorious victory.

\*

Amy and I parked in the Episcopal Church lot on weeknights, except Wednesdays, when the church had a regular community event, and made out, kissing and petting for hours. I hoped that our fooling around gained a spiritual respectability there, like in a confessional; we'd instantly be forgiven our discretions.

Although well lit, the lot nestled into a small hill, private and quiet. Occasionally a car would drive up, turn the corner, to face my car—us huddled down, arms around each other, often containing our anxious laughter—and spin out of the lot, tires laying strips of rubber as if underscoring our delinquency.

I backed my Plymouth Duster in at such an angle as to allow a fast exit.

After about four months of dating, mainly kissing and blind groping, Amy maneuvered my left hand to her right breast. I was afraid to touch her incorrectly. My hand remained still. She rotated my palm in a clockwise motion, guiding as if to say:

*This is how.*

I pumped her flesh furiously.

"Ouch! Stop it."

"But you. . ."

"No. I don't. Wait." She folded her arms.

I sighed, looking out the windshield at the church spire. At sixteen, I had a crush on Pam from art class, her hands perpetually dotted with white paint. I rode past her house night after night. My desire to see her in one of the windows, or, better, catch her as she left the house and spy from behind a bush or a parked car as she strolled by twirling her braid, singing to herself, filled me with hope. But, after months of limited success, the desire, the hope, melted away, leaving dryness, emptiness, as if I'd lost my identity. Even if she

caught a glimpse of me, she wouldn't recognize the boy on the Frankenstein bike loitering at her gate like a gallant horseman.

*Amy liked me.* She had wavy blonde hair, blue eyes, long legs, and wisps of hair on her upper lip, invisible, adding a feathery quality to her kiss.

I should already know what to do to her.

A few minutes passed before we silently resumed our kissing. About ten minutes later I lifted her breast, gently. I found the nipple and pinched it between thumb and forefinger. She moaned into my mouth, her teeth scraping my tongue.

I don't remember who unzipped my pants.

Amy stared, her expression blank. I hoped she wasn't disappointed. But she said nothing, hesitated, stroked me a few times, then leaned back on the bench seat and lowered her sweats, her panties, below her knees. *Did I help her? Did I force her down?* I don't remember.

She may have said, "Put it in. Please." But I could hardly hear.

I eased myself on top of her. Her skin was ice cold. My arm cramped. I fumbled, prodded. An instant of resistance, then, just like that, I was inside, all the way. It burned at first, until the constricting walls changed from pebbly dry to wet to slippery.

I watched myself move; our thighs rub and separate, rub and separate.

Amy whispered something hoarsely.

"You okay?" I asked over and over as I continued. I honestly don't think I listened for an answer. I pressed her flat, chest-to-chest, quickening my pace. She groaned, her legs stiff. Pain flared as she suddenly scratched me. Later, I realized she had tried to push me off her.

I quickened my pace.

Her voice cracked, high-pitched, clear. "Stop!"

I panicked, jerked out, ejaculating on the floor mat. She held her body together and cried. I pulled up my pants, zipped and buckled, then reached for her hand even though my instinct was to start the car and go, take her home. Amy withdrew, returned, allowing this intimacy, her fingers damp and trembling. Her nails had left a straight, reddish line on my skin, arced below the elbow. But it faded quickly, leaving nothing behind. I wondered how I'd clean the mess on the floor. I had immediately dressed, selfishly covered up, oblivious to her shiny, plastic skin, the baby blue panties choking her ankles.

Her legs were still exposed. Suddenly, Amy collapsed against me, head on chest. My tentative arms encircled her and I waited. Her hand pressed mine, the pressure driving my knuckles deep into vinyl. Her heart counted, shouted, through her skin. When a car swung into the lot, bright headlights blazing, I turned to Amy, angel of Earth, desperate to ask if we could leave. She winced, her tear-streaked face illuminated. I said nothing, looking down when she looked down. She whispered, "I'm bleeding." I watched her legs even after the intruder had retreated, the light gone, everything in shadow, me as blind and stupid as I've ever been. As she struggled with her clothes I imagined the blood I didn't see, a circle seeping into the fabric, separate from her body now, traveling, errant rivers snaking across the landscape between us, soon to crest my leg, indistinguishable now as to who had bled, as to who would wear the permanent scar, as to who deserved it more, the woman or the man.

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**John Barrett** received his MFA in creative writing from Virginia Commonwealth University and his MA from Hollins University, where he was awarded the Melanie Hook Rice award for best novel. This is his first national publication. His current project is a book length memoir, *Life Could Be A Dream*, which explores his complex relationship with his mostly absent father, the former high tenor for the fifties pop quartet The Crew Cuts, singers of the hit "Sh-Boom." John is an assistant professor at Bloomsburg University, teaching developmental writing, creative writing, and composition.

Alas, he never swung, sat, sipped soft drinks, sunbathed, or otherwise enjoyed the beauty of a front porch. He remembers, however, throwing a bright pink rubber ball against the neighbor's porch steps for endless summer hours, imagining the wildest of World Series competitions. He remembers visiting Caney, Kansas, and coveting the grand, wrap-around front porches that graced the side streets of that town, shadowy open spaces that seemed to be more about community than privacy or luxury, places where hats were definitely hung. His next house, he has promised himself and his daughter, will indeed have a spacious front porch.