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Silent Men

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CATHLEEN CALBERT

Silent Men

Who were they? That generation, those men. Such mysteries.
I believe that men were bigger then, their backsides wide,
their faces manly and mean, or sunken in within their own
miseries.

But all I have are fragments, details, sensory memories
of my father, who smelled of Wild Turkey, Old Spice,
Brillcream,
and something like a man's leather jacket worn in the rain

or the chamois he used to smooth over the curves of his cars.
What drove him? How could I decipher his devotions? I
know only
the periphery. He liked deep-sea fishing, coming home
loaded

down with the huge, bloody things that he clomped in the
house
and dumped in the sink, filling all of us with the smell of
blood
and fish and the sea. It's true it was good, the fresh catch

he folded in foil, baked in mayonnaise and lemons, the best
I've ever eaten. I believed in that flesh I tasted some of where
he'd been. But I couldn't be certain. He didn't take us with
him.

Who knew what such men did on their own? Not my mother,
who stayed at home. Nothing was told. He had his own room
with a lock, and he had a key he carried with him into the
world

when he'd leave, sealing up the king-sized bed where he made
 us
 stay if we were bad on Saturdays, silenced fairy-tale children
 who'd awoken the ogre from his drunken sleeping. Struck
 dumb,

I watched the wallpaper, a lady's choice, all lilacs and tea roses,
 stained yellow with his hair oil, and I wondered at his clutter
 of male things: the *Playboys* I would be punished for touching,

glass rings on the night-stand, glass ashtrays left heaping,
 matches from The Red Lantern, The Spanish Gypsy, the ham
 radio so
 he could still play submarine, this sailor lost at sea, submerged

in a fatherhood born of unexpected pregnancies and believing
 he could still somehow do the right thing, stranded though
 he was in the suburbs of southern California, too far away

from the silent lakes of Michigan and a large, immigrant
 family.

He'd run away at sixteen. At twenty, he rode his motorcycle
 across
 the country. In his fifties, he planted daffodils and served me

tiny highballs in glasses with naked ladies and racy sayings.
 It's true a few times I too attempted to befriend him,
 coquettishly plucking the Rice Krispie moles on his shoulder,

trying my tongue on "Daddy," and wondering what life would
 be like
 as a real daughter with a real father one could say such things
 to
 without that awful falsehood ringing through, for, truly,

I hated how he played with me, and I was already out of his
 reach.

I froze in poses, falling in place in my own game of Statues.
 I was Helen Keller. I was through the Looking Glass.

As for him, I figured he must belong to the mob or something:
 my mobster father who could ice his enemies. After all, he was always standing at the edge of things, silent, shadowed, smoking,

an underworld figure whose family hated him coming home dead-drunk, dark-eyed, angry, so when he did bang in, we slunk off to the safety of our separate rooms

though a few times he seemed to think it was his duty to try and teach us a thing or two, so he told my brothers, who feared him, not to knock a girl up, and they never did,

and he told my sister, who loved him, she looked like a slut, so she did, and he told me, though I wanted nothing to do with him, I couldn't be trusted: I'd already been molested.

He tried to run over the boys after they'd been arrested. At least, he trashed their mailboxes with his Grand Prix, and it was their turn to call the police. What possessed him?

Did it hurt to have me spring past his hands, glancing back fearfully, always running to my mother, who was concentrating her life on hating him until she finally dyed

her hair red and got a job that let her be in a uniform and sleep with a fireman, and we saw our father on obligatory visits to his little bachelor pad, where he passed his evenings

making stupid things: mosaic ashtrays (the tiles arranged into matadors and blue bulls), or his jokes like the plaque of "The Family Jewels" (two walnut halves glued in place)

which he hung next to his old navy cartoons of dream girls: "Broad on Starboard Bow" and "Saluting the Waves." I believe I missed the meaning of these and many things,

and I find at best I can just pen a silhouette of him,
the dark image of my girlhood dreams, to set before friends
when we puzzle through the pieces, sharing our stories

of the same drinking, silence, rage, that have left us
wondering, Who were they? Those men, that generation,
the fathers of such accomplished and such fucked-up
daughters.