

# Tampa Review 47/48

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## My Father and the Hair Grafter

*No inventor can be a man of business, you know.*

—Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

When my father's life was on the skids—after he quit his job, and my mother filed for divorce, and he got arrested for shoplifting steaks in Jordano's Grocery Store—he moved to a shack on El Sueño Road, out past the Earl Warren Show Grounds. A few weeks later, he volunteered for a series of experimental transplants, in pursuit of a head of hair. The transplants cost nothing, for Dr. Lucas, the dermatologist who treated him, hoped to make my father his star exhibit and thus recoup his time and effort; but they were painful, requiring more than twenty injections of Novocain a day in the crown of my father's head. Eventually, some of the grafts took; in the short run, however, the procedure left bleeding scabs. Their ugliness embarrassed my father, made it awkward to apply for jobs, and complicated what was already the nadir of his life.

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One Christmas, my sister Laurie and I were sitting on the twin bed in my old yellow bedroom in Santa Barbara. We had closed the door for privacy, and my Marantz tape recorder lay between us on the faded yellow and brown patchwork quilt. As was our custom during family gatherings, Laurie and I were recording memories of our father—how he would awaken us before dawn to take our breakfast to Leadbetter Beach while it was cold and deserted in the darkness; how he delighted in names such as "Popcorn and Pink," the colors of the paints on my sisters' bedroom walls; and how he loved creating things for us kids: building me a desk in the living-room coat closet and making me a magician's hat from a Quaker Oats box, painted black and sprayed with glitter, when I was in my magician phase. In Minnesota, he had made us a playground in the backyard: transforming

an old oak ladder into monkey bars, swathing the rungs in glossy yellow and blue tape to prevent splinters and add a touch of glamor; and erecting parallel bars and two wooden swings, one for standing and pumping, the other for sitting and singing, while we dragged our feet in the dirt.

My youngest sister and I were always trying to remember and analyze our father's life. Sometimes my brother and my other sister joined in this effort, but my mother rejected such discussions as a waste of time. "Life is forward!" she would say, like a soldier giving a command, or, in a frustrated tone, lament: "Why do we *always* have to live in the past?"

Only Laurie seemed to share my need to make sense of our father's downward spiral. We would sit for hours in that small front bedroom, recording discussions of him, struggling to grasp why a life that once held great promise had ended so sadly. During this particular session, Laurie suggested I try to interview the hair grafter. "You might gain some valuable insights," she said. "You shouldn't let the opportunity pass."

In theory, she was right, but I really didn't want to meet Dr. Lucas. My whole family regarded him as sleazy, because he had experimented on my father when he was mentally disturbed, unable to distinguish friends from enemies or make decisions in his own best interest. When my mother overheard what my sister and I were contemplating, she shuddered. "I don't want anything to do with that!" she said, before leaving the room. After a while, Laurie made my decision easier by offering to drive me to the doctor's house, provided that she would not have to meet him, but could wait for me in the car. At that point, I dutifully made the call, half hoping to find that Dr. Lucas had passed away. But he answered on the second ring and readily agreed to talk with me in his Montecito home.



On the day of our appointment, in the middle of the afternoon, I climbed into the passenger side of Laurie's car and set off on my reluctant adventure. It was five days after Christmas, and the weather was typical of California in winter: clear and sunny, with a vivid sky overhead. The blue of the sky was more intense than most of the colors on the ground. Without rain, the vegetation had faded to dull gold or died altogether; the earth was pale chocolate and so dry that dust blew off its surface at the slightest whisper of air. I had forgotten to take the doctor's address, and I knocked on the door of an empty house before finally stumbling on his actual residence.

The door was opened by a woman with grayish-blond hair, dressed in a pink cotton housecoat and accompanied by a mud-spattered white poodle she called Cinderella. "My husband will be with you soon," she said. "He's checking his stocks on the Internet." Then she and the poodle retreated to the back of the house.

Dr. Lucas kept me waiting twenty minutes, and I used the time to examine the living room. It was decorated with artificial flowers and hanging plants. A mirror covered one entire wall, and oriental rugs overlapped each other on the living room carpet. On the coffee table stood ceramic panthers and a ceramic stage coach drawn by ceramic horses.

At last, Dr. Lucas appeared—a liver-spotted, elderly man, wearing a thin, embroidered blue shirt and khaki pants. He sat down on the damask-covered chair opposite me, in front of the bar, and apologized for making me wait. From our phone conversation, he knew that I wanted to write a book about my father, and he began by asking: "How much writing have you done?"

I hesitated, not knowing what to say.

"Because I'm looking for someone to write my autobiography," he said. As the doctor leaned forward, his skin emitted the fruity fragrance of his aftershave. The smell was cloying to me, and I moved my chair slightly backward in what I hoped was an unobtrusive gesture. I told him I was only visiting in Santa Barbara, and he said in that case, it "wouldn't work" for me to become his biographer. Grateful for the quick reprieve, I changed the subject, asking how he and my father had met.

"Your father called on me as a salesman for

a pharmaceutical company," he said. "And we became friendly. He was a pleasant man to talk to. I called him 'Dick' instead of 'Richard,' and we exchanged personal thoughts. Later, he quit his job and moved to a shack on El Sueño Road, and he had me over to lunch now and then. I don't recall any other friends that he had, so he looked forward to my visits." Interrupting his narrative, Dr. Lucas whistled several times, in what seemed to be a signal, glancing back toward the hall from which he had emerged. After a few whistles, his wife appeared, an annoyed expression on her face. He asked her to bring us some water, and she did so quickly, then left the room.

"He was a mechanical genius," Dr. Lucas said, dangling his water glass in the air. "That jade bead processor was brilliant!" At the time of my parents' divorce, my father had been perfecting a more efficient way to transform jade stones into beads. The jade he used was not the valuable emerald-green or white variety but a more common kind of jade, from the mountains of California's Central Coast: creamy-green, rather dull in hue, with uneven intensity. Despite its flaws, my father found it beautiful. Maybe he was intrigued by the gem's cloudy swirls, the mysterious veins that appear to flow beneath the hard, green surface.



Dr. Lucas's voice grew louder with enthusiasm as he remembered more and more details of his friendship with my father. "I would say to him: 'You know you can't live in this damn shack forever,'" the doctor recalled. "And he would say: 'I know, I know, but one of these ideas will come through.'" The words sounded just like my father, and it was pleasant to hear his way of speaking again after all this time.

Dreamer though he may have been, my father had reason to believe that one of his ideas would come through. After all, it had happened before. Along with his unfinished efforts, such as the tape gun and the jade bead processor, and his outright failures, such as the "olfactory nerve theory" and the "individual flying machine," my father had also achieved one great success as an inventor. It was called the "Magic Bow Machine." He invented it in his own garage on his own time; while employed as a ribbon salesman for the Minnesota Mining and

Manufacturing Company (3M). A moderately dangerous Rube Goldberg contraption, with exposed razor blades, my father's machine was the first to make the "Magic Bow." That was the name 3M had given to its version of the ornamental pompon bow, the one with all the loops, which is still used in gift-wrapping. Before my father's invention, the elegant bow could be made by hand, but only by those nimble enough to do so. His machine made it possible for every salesgirl in every department store throughout the country to make the Magic Bow. Netting a million dollars for 3M, the invention led to my father's promotion from salesman to "Idea Man" and his transfer to the Company's headquarters in Saint Paul.

And at first, things went well for my father in his new job. Upon his arrival, co-workers, knowing of the Magic Bow Machine, greeted him with admiration and high expectations, and his boss, because of my father's presumed genius, gave him freedom to create in his own good time.

However, my father's inchoate ideas were sometimes met with doubts and criticisms, which angered him. And nothing at 3M seemed to catch his fancy after the Bow Machine—certainly not the project in which his boss tried to engage him: an attempt to use "waste" from the ribbon-making process to improve "journal boxes"—those boxes that sit on the hubs of rail car wheels, dripping oil onto the axles.

Most likely he was already disillusioned when, in the autumn of our third year in St. Paul, my father accompanied his co-workers on a field trip to a railroad factory. There, he smelled some liquid foam that he came to believe had poisoned him. Soon after this trip, he quit going to work at the Lab. Afraid that he was not getting enough fresh air in his lungs, he stayed in his bedroom with the windows open throughout the Minnesota winter.

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"I knew he was off-base by his delusions," Dr. Lucas continued. "He thought someone would come after him at night, and he kept a shotgun. I keep a shotgun too, but not at my *elbow*." He took a drink of water and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Another example," Dr. Lucas said, "is that in the mountains above Morro Bay, your father found a big chunk of jade, and he was convinced

it was the skull of a man. It was a delusion on his part. A delusion. I told him a fact: that people never turn into jade when they die. But he believed it was an ancient skull, so he was off-base there. He wouldn't accept my fact, as a physician, that when people die, they don't turn into jade."

"He called it 'Yorick,'" I said. The museum where my father took the stone had rejected out of hand that it was anything but a rock; nevertheless, my father's notion, and his excitement about it, floated through our lives for some time.

My father had many projects over the years that now strike me as strange, though during my childhood, they were simply part of the normal ambience of our lives. That last spring in Minnesota, for instance, he acquired a belief in flying saucers and kept vigil for them until late at night in our back yard. He also became interested in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel and devoted himself to its study with his usual enthusiasm. I still have our old Bible with its maroon cover and my father's red-penciled stars and reckonings in the margins of Ezekiel: 40-48. There, the Hebrew prophet, during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE, narrates his mystical vision of a new temple in Jerusalem. My mother tells me that my father was converting Ezekiel's measurements from cubits and reeds into feet and yards. He thought he had discovered—in the writings of this ancient seer—the blueprint he needed to build an individual flying machine.

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"Could you tell me about the hair transplants?" I asked, glancing curiously at the doctor's own hair. Sparse and ash-colored, it appeared to be slicked back with gel, like the coifs of teenage movie stars from the nineteen-fifties.

The poodle named Cinderella had wandered back into the room and now stood between the doctor's knees. As he leaned forward to stroke her, I wondered how his hands had felt on my father's head. "Your father was prematurely balding," he said. "Doing a great deal of grafting was entirely justified in his case. He was very brave about it. You stick a needle in somebody's head and inject fluid, and it hurts, and he handled it like a soldier."

The image of the injection made me cringe, but at the same time I felt a flicker of pride. "What

was motivating him?"

I had framed my question broadly on purpose, but he evidently considered it stupid and replied in a sarcastic tone: "To get hair on his head." Then he added: "Most men handle it well. They want hair desperately. They are of the opinion that the girls will like them better, which is not an opinion I share, because it isn't the truth. They like the man's personality, his kindness and warmth. But you can't teach a young man this. I couldn't make him see the light, and I never made anybody see the light on this, and I made a lot of money out of it, so why bother?" I wondered at his calling my father, who had been in his early forties at the time, a "young man."

"How did he reach his demise?" he asked after a moment.

"He committed suicide."

He sat silently, taking it in. "Well, I didn't see that coming. If I had still been in touch with him, I might have been able to prevent it, but I hadn't spoken to Dick in some time. After he moved up north, it was out of sight, out of mind." In that instant, I felt close to the dermatologist. Even he, I thought, had truly cared about my father and regretted the way he died.

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It was late afternoon when I walked down the path from Dr. Lucas's house to the car where Laurie sat waiting for me. She had parked underneath a lemon eucalyptus tree whose leaves exuded a fresh, pungent, lemony scent as I approached. On the drive back to our mother's house—past the old cemetery on the hill, past the Bird Refuge, where western grebes swam in the lake—I thought of how my father used to wake me in the morning when I was in high school. "Time to get up, Beautycute!" he would say, switching on a lamp away from my bed, so the sudden brightness wouldn't hurt my eyes. Minutes later, walking down the hall to wash my face, I would see him at the kitchen table, his head silhouetted in the eastern light. With slender fingers holding a cigarette in one hand, a pen in the other, he would jot down a few words on a white paper napkin and then look up, his dark brown eyes gazing into space.

No doubt he was trying to fathom some deep enigma or outlining the steps of a new invention, for those were the things he loved to do. My father's approach to life can be summed up in the

two maxims he gave me to live by: "We were put on earth to solve problems" and "You have to do something great!" In keeping with these maxims, one of his favorite books was *The Creative Process*, edited by Brewster Ghiselin. He owned it in the 1952 Mentor edition, with the picture of an eye, a hand, and a head on its blood-orange cover. As with all his cherished books, my father had made the volume his own, fashioning index tabs from adhesive tape and scoring passages with wavy red lines. I remember the book's bright presence on our living room shelves, next to Winston Churchill's *The Gathering Storm* and my mother's Agatha Christies. From time to time, I would take down *The Creative Process* and read Coleridge's account of writing "Kubla Khan" in an opium-induced reverie, or Poincaré's story of discovering the solution to a mathematical problem while stepping onto a bus.

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When I glanced out the car window again, Laurie and I were driving on Cabrillo Boulevard, alongside East Beach. The day was remarkably clear. Looking out across the water, we could see the nearest of the Channel Islands, Anacapa and Santa Cruz, looming above the horizon. At Leadbetter Point, we turned away from the sea and ascended the hill leading up to Cliff Drive; a pink glow already suffused the sky behind the houses on the Mesa. As we drove, I tried to tell my sister that the hair grafter wasn't as bad as we had thought. "He appreciated our father's genius," I said. "He went out of his way to provide companionship when he was terribly alone."

But Laurie scoffed at this. "He shouldn't have let him go through all that pain," she said. Arguing with me throughout the ride, my sister remained firm in her position, while I soon began to waver. By the time the car crunched on the gravel in our mother's yard, my judgment of Dr. Lucas had hardened again, and I had lost all conviction about what I had learned.

A few nights later, Laurie and I watched the movie *A Man for All Seasons*, about the life of the martyr Thomas More. I had seen the movie many times and always cried passionately during the scene when Sir Thomas, awaiting death in the Tower, bids his family goodbye. I identified with Margaret, More's daughter and soulmate. She understands, better than his wife, the secret re-

cesses of his heart. At the end of the movie, after More's execution, King Henry VIII commands that Sir Thomas's head be displayed on a pole to warn other would-be traitors. A month later, Margaret takes down her father's head and keeps it with her until her death.

The next morning, just before waking, I dreamed that my father was still alive and that we still lived in our first home in Santa Barbara, a small maroon and cream-colored tract house on Santa Catalina Street, just a few blocks from the cliffs jutting out over the sea. It was a sunny afternoon, and, in the dream, my father, brother, and I were shooting baskets on the driveway. My father and brother played gracefully, usually making their shots, whereas I was a poor player, rarely getting the ball through the hoop. My mother had called us for supper, and we were about to go in when I accidentally hit my father

on the crown of his head with the ball. Then I hurried to his side, took his shiny bald head in my hands, and cradled it long and lovingly.

When I woke up, it took me a few seconds to realize that I was not in our first house, on Santa Catalina Street, but in the house on La Marina, which my father had built out of California Redwoods, high on the Mesa's convex bulge, where the sun rises over the Pacific. With a jolt of pain I remembered that my father was dead and had been dead for many years. What hurt me most was the knowledge that, during all this time, I had gone on with my life: earning degrees, building a career, falling in and out of love, as if I had forgotten him, his suffering, and early death. And now, too, there was nothing for it but to get up on that cold, limpid morning, look out at the silver ocean's vast expanse, and try to go on without him.

