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Dogman Lie

BY DAN DOMENCH

MY FATHER'S A LIAR. Ask him any question and he looks at you blankly while searching his brain for the best horseshit he can muster. Then he starts right in on you.

Take this Sunday morning in the townhouse where I grew up on a side street not far from Congress Street. I'm folding freshly laundered clothes and packing them in a bag to throw in the car. I have to get back to college in Boston for a meeting. Feeling hungry, I call out to my father through the doorway to the living room, asking if he's eaten at the new diner on the corner.

My father thinks that because he's a fiction writer, lying is his prerogative. I suppose he considers it literary practice. If you ask a painter a question, would you be okay with her licking the tip of a brush, dipping it in paint, and smearing her answer on a canvas? If you ask a guitarist a question, would you think it acceptable for him to grab his six string and pick away at you?

Through the doorway I see my father put down his magazine, see the distant look in his eyes, and I cringe. He inhales through his nose. "Charlie Hawkins opened that diner. I respect him. When he had the hot dog cart on Exchange Street twenty years ago, he was almost totally responsible for keeping the dogman's pack of dogs alive."

You see how it is? You ask about a diner and you get a dogman.

"I never told you this before," my father says, "but the dogman woke you every morning from the time

you were three years old to four and a half. He was a scarecrow of a man who emerged from a hidden cave near the sewage dome on the Eastern Promenade and zigzagged down Congress and Cumberland and Spring and every downtown alley with a pack of nine brown dogs."

"Dad. The diner. That's all. The diner."

"It's all connected," my father says, "Nine brown long-legged dogs the size of young fawns would come down our street at dawn circling the dogman as he screamed at them. They wanted only food and affection, but he screamed like a vengeful murderer at the dogs that barked and yelped and scuttled away from his kicks in pitiful self-defense. You'd go to the window and watch the dogs pass by below. They made you sad and there was an ex-

pression on your face watching them. I saw it—a fierceness."

I say, with a touch of tone, venting some, "He was waking your child up. Why didn't you do something about it?"

"It was a phenomenon," my father says. "The dogman lunged and screamed at the sweet sad dogs all day in a trauma inducing performance that we Portlanders seemed to believe we deserved somehow. This tyrant. This fascist, showing us something, but what?"

"I have to go soon," I say. "There'll be traffic."

"Bankers shared their avocado sandwiches with the starving dogs. Old ladies doddering out of morning Mass petted the dogs until the dogman snarled at them. When the pack crossed a busy street, stopping cars for blocks, no one honked. Think of it, a pack of nine dogs in downtown Portland all day, every day. It was the young Charlie Hawkins who fed the dogs, got organized about it. He set out piles of dry dog food in a wide circle around his hot dog cart, so each dog had a chance to find a bit to eat. And bowls of cool water. It was Charlie Hawkins who kept those dogs alive."

My father pauses, waiting for his cue, and I provide it quickly, because my father will wait silently for his cue until you provide it. I say, "What happened to the dogman and his pack of dogs?"



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“The dogman disappeared suddenly and his dogs were dispersed into loving homes in town. You can see their descendants in the city parks today. You know this yourself. You grew up with a fascination for these deer-like dogs with their look of furrowed gratitude. As a toddler you would go out of your way to pet one. And you know what? When you did there was that expression on your face again, that fierceness.”

“I have no memory of this.”

“It almost seems,” my father says, “that the original pack of nine dogs became the origin of a breed of Portland dog. Gentle, worried, grateful, and street-wise. I wonder if it is possible that these future generations of the original nine dogs remember the pain their mothers and fathers felt from the boot of the dogman. I wonder if the dogman is the devil who haunts their dog dreams.”

The drop in his tone tells me it's over. No twist in his ending. A lie below his usual standards.

“Not one of your best,” I say. “More of an epilogue leaning on Christian imagery. And you never answered the central question: the diner, is it any good?”

My father says, “I haven't eaten there, yet. I believe that a man who went to the trouble to set small piles of puppy chow around his hot dog cart and bowls of water will serve no-nonsense food in generous portions.”

“Maybe,” I say, “but you don't really know. Only speculation.”

My father's gray eyebrows move upward. He rises from his chair and walks toward me, smiling. Uh oh. We're still in the lie.

He says, “My scientific son, my biology doctorate candidate, what is it that you specialize in, the field of study?”

“You know what I study,” I say.

He waits.

I give up. “Epigenetics.”

“It's a fascinating topic,” he said, “the way our genes are influenced by what happens to us. The way something we see from our window as a child might have future ramifications.”

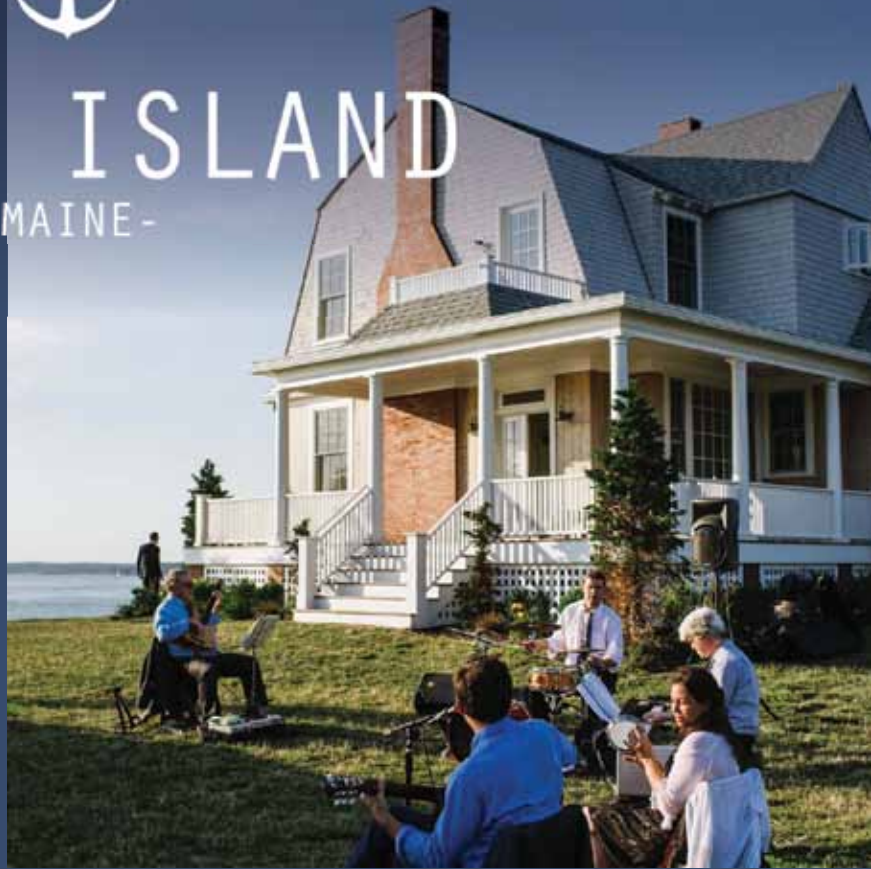
“Jesus, Dad,” I say. “You went to a lot of trouble to drag me personally into this one.”

“No trouble at all,” my father says. “Let's go get pancakes.” ■



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