

COWBOYS

fiction by SUSAN STEINBERG
from AMERICAN SHORT FICTION



There are some who say I did not kill my father.
Not technically they mean.

But the ones who say I did not kill my father are the ones who want to have sex with me.

They say I did not kill my father because they cannot have sex with a woman who killed.

What I mean is they cannot have sex with a woman who carries, like all women carry, an unbearable weight.

So they mix me another drink, they laugh, they say, You did not kill your father.

What they think they believe and what they truly believe: two different things.

I am still able to lie there nights, but I am unable to do much more than that.

Meaning I am still able to lie there nights, but I am unable to stick around in the mornings.

Meaning I am unable to lie there pretending I want what it is certain women want.

Because of this and because of that. And I cannot pretend to be anything other than the result of this and that.

When the doctor called at 4 a.m., waked me at 4 a.m. from a dream I can almost remember, something about chasing dogs in a field, something about a fence, he introduced himself as the doctor.

He said, I am Doctor Such and Such, in this upright voice, this doctor's voice, and I laughed and said, You're who. I said, Who is this,

My brother was also on the line, and my brother was in Boston, and the doctor was in Baltimore, and I was in a place called Warrensburg, Missouri. I was in Warrensburg, Missouri, for a job I was trying to quit. When I mention Warrensburg, Missouri, people say, Where the fuck is that.

I tell them there are cowboys. I tell them there are tornadoes that can carry your house across the state. There are brown recluse spiders, I tell them, in every corner of every room. It's a shit hole, I tell them.

And there I was in it, trying my best to sleep right through it, a doctor telling me, at 4 a.m., to please be serious.

I was not always serious, and somehow the doctor already knew this, knew perhaps because I laughed when he said he was the doctor. Or he knew perhaps because my brother told him I would not be serious. Or he knew perhaps because when he told me to kill my father, I laughed again.

He did not, of course, use the word *kill*. He had another word, a series of words, a more technical way of wording.

The doctor sounded exhausted, and my brother sounded exhausted. My brother and his wife had a one-year-old boy. The boy was always crying in the background. My brother was always saying, Shh.

My brother always had circles under his eyes. They were bluish, the circles, and they made him look beaten down.

You look like dad, I said to him once.
Fuck you, he said to me more than once.

We were no longer kids and this was a serious matter. The doctor had been up all night.

Trying to save your father, he said.

To no avail, he said, and I wondered at the word *avail*, wondered if the doctor got to be a doctor because of whatever it was he had that made him use the word *avail*.

I wanted something to eat. I wanted to run downstairs in the massive house I was renting in Warrensburg, Missouri, and root through the refrigerator for the leftovers. The leftovers were in takeout containers, and I wanted to bring them up to my bed, switch on the TV, move into that blue-lit space.

The doctor said my father had flatlined several times, and I knew the word *flatlined* from my ex who had flatlined three times when we were together. He had flatlined, my ex, because he was an addict, and being an addict, as it turns out, will make one flatline. After the first flatline, my mother, a nurse, said, He'll never be the same. But he was

the same, as it turned out, because he flattened again. After the third flattening, we broke up. I'd like to say we broke up because I'd had enough of his flattening, but really he broke up with me for another woman, a thinner woman, a paler woman, the veins too vivid through her face, and she eventually flattened too, and she eventually died from this, but he did not.

He became a firefighter.

I moved to Warrensburg, Missouri.

The whole world just went on.

The doctor said my father would be a vegetable, and upon hearing this word, I imagined a plate. I imagined vegetables on this plate.

One does not want to imagine this. One wants to imagine one's father spinning through a field, arms spread, something dynamic like that.

Even something totally made up like that.

My father would never have spun through a field.

He was mad, yes, but he was not that kind of mad. He was not that kind of happy mad. He was the other kind. He was ferocious.

And besides, what field. And where.

It was Baltimore where we all were before we all weren't, and there were no fields, just streets of nothing and more nothing, just my ex knocking on some boarded-up door, just me waiting in the car.

But here, where I was now, where I am no longer, Warrensburg, Missouri, there were fields.

The doctor said my name.

He said, Please.

My brother said my name.

I had a decision to make. I had a serious decision to make, because I was the oldest kid. Though, as stated, I was not the most serious of the two. And my serious brother with his serious boy screaming his head off in some dark room in their serious city, was waiting for me to do the right thing.

This was years ago, and I'm telling you this because the story came to me today just for no real reason, just because I happened to see a guy digging around in the trash, and I was like, You again. I was like, Get out of there. Get out my head, I was like.

And I'm telling you this, because some have been wondering why I am the way I am.

Which is to say a whirlwind.

Which is to say a lot of things.

I could not at first kill my father. I at first said no. I said, Not as long as he's still breathing.

But he isn't breathing, said the doctor.

Not technically, he said.

The doctor sounded fed up. And not fed up with the limitations of science. And not fed up with the imitations of the human body.

Meaning not fed up how I was.

A man I knew in Warrensburg, Missouri, a man I knew from the job I needed to quit, had been bitten by a brown recluse. He'd rolled over it one night in bed and got bitten in the ass. When he told me the story I laughed. I was like, Why were you naked. He was like, Wrong question. Because he was trying to tell me the bite dissolved the skin on his ass. Because he was trying to tell me that this just wasn't right.

The technical term is necrotized.

The point is I was not always serious.

No, the point is we're limited.

The doctor said, A machine is making him breathe.

He did not use the word *machine*.

I said I would have to call my mother to get her advice, and my brother said, Don't be a dumbass, and the doctor sighed in that way that the assholes I have dated since sigh when they do not get what they want.

Like the restaurant is out of chicken wings. Like the beer is flat. Like I'm trying to convince them I'm a terrible person. Like I'm already stepping into my skirt. Like I'm already reaching for the doorknob, a bigger whore than they want me to be.

They sigh and it applies pressure to the woman. And the woman is then supposed to give them what they want.

Which is to say the woman is then supposed to perform.

Which is to say the woman is then supposed to know the subtle difference between being a woman and performing one.

I said, I'm calling my mother.

My brother said, Don't.

I thought I could get her on the line. I didn't know if it would work. It involved disconnecting the call. It involved dialing her number. It involved reconnecting the call, hoping everyone was still on the line. What I mean is it involved a certain kind of trust.

The metaphor is unintentional.

I mean of disconnection.

There were many machines in the world all operating at once. All whirring and shaking at once. There are always all these machines in the world whirring and shaking and making it all go. There is always, therefore, the option of disconnection.

There is no intentional meaning in this story.

I would not subject you to intentional meaning.

I would not subject you to some grand scheme.

My mother was in Miami. Which wasn't where she should have been.

But I wasn't where I should have been. No one was when you think about it. I mean when you really think about it. I don't mean anything deep about anything deep. I just mean I was confused. And yet, I disconnected, pressed some buttons, and there was my mother. And I reconnected, and there we all were.

I said, They want me to kill dad.

My mother had left my father thirty years before. There is no reason to go into the details. Suffice it to say it was his fault, as if that wasn't already clear.

As if that wasn't already totally clear.

I mean look at me.

I mean look at my history.

I mean I was not calling my mother because she loved my father. I was not even calling her because she was my mother. I was calling her because she was a nurse. I hoped that because she was a nurse she would tell me the right thing to do. I'm not talking morally. I'm talking medically. She knew about this. Though of course once she was wrong. I mean once she was dead wrong. I mean when my ex flatlined the first time. I mean when she said, He'll never be the same. She was of course dead wrong. I mean he was one hundred percent the same. I mean he was one hundred percent the same in every way.

Impossible, a doctor might have said.

Not impossible, I might have said.

He was a vegetable going under, a vegetable coming back.

But his heart, a doctor might have said.

I might have laughed.

I might have said something regrettable.

My mother said, What.

My brother said, Tell her.

The doctor said, He flatlined.

My mother said, You have to kill him.

She did not, of course, use these words. I don't know why I'm being

so melodramatic. She used technical terms. She said, Take him off the respirator. She said, It's the right thing to do. She said, Trust me. She said, I need to go though. She said, I need to get to work. She said, I'm sorry.

And because I more often than not do the wrong thing, I said fine. A few days later, because I was the oldest, because the decision was mine, I would donate my father's body to science. I would do this over the phone, and the conversation would be recorded. A woman would ask me questions I had not before this heard.

Do you wish to donate the lungs.

Do you wish to donate the heart.

There were other organs one doesn't think of.

There were other things besides organs.

The tissue was to go to the tissue bank.

The eyes were to go to the eye bank.

There were other things I can't remember.

But it was on the eyes, at the thought of the eyes removed from the head, the thought of the eyes going their own way, that I started to cry. This was not about anything deep. I was not suddenly a believer of the soul. I was not suddenly a believer of anything.

It was just think about it.

And when I started to cry, the woman said, It's OK, said, Let it out, and I stopped crying and sat there, silent, and the recording just went, just recorded my breathing, the woman's breathing, the sounds of static in the phone, and minutes passed.

And I thought for some reason of a night years before, me, my father, and my brother in some fast food place. The fast food place was in a parking lot, and my brother was visiting home from college, and he was sticking his French fries into his milkshake, and I said, Sick, and he said, Fuck you, and I said, Fuck you, and he said, Try it dumbass, and I stuck a French fry into the milkshake, and it was amazing. There was something about the salty and sweet. Or the hot and cold. I don't know what it was. My father was poor then, poorer the next day, poorer the next day, poorer the next day, living in some shit hole then, like a hostel, like a hospital, like a halfway house, and my brother said he would take him to dinner. Anywhere you want, he said. My father wanted to go to the fast food place. He met us there. He was filthy. His shirt was missing buttons. He ordered two cheeseburgers. He ordered onion rings. He ordered an orange soda. He ate too fast. And watching us stick French fries into the milkshake, he said, You're both sick. But then he

tried it too, and then he laughed, and then we ordered more French fries and another milkshake, and what I'm trying to say is you should try it. What I'm trying to say is. What I'm trying to say is.

I did not donate the eyes to the eye bank. At some point I said, I can't, I don't know why.

The parts that didn't go to science were burned. And no I did not want the ashes. I told the woman to send the ashes to my brother. Because my brother was a better person than I was. He was a total asshole, I told the woman, but he was still a better person than I was. I said, He's a total asshole. But in the grand scheme, I said. In the big grand scheme, I said. And I laughed, meaning I really laughed, and the recording went on, and the woman cleared her throat, and I just kept on going.

The day the ashes arrived, my brother called me and said, What the fuck, and I said, What, and he said, What the fuck, and I said Grow up. There are no more details to tell.

There is no reason to go into the why of my father.

Or the why of madness, which I cannot answer.

Or the why of addiction, which I also cannot answer.

Or the why of poor, which I also cannot answer.

Suffice it to say it's always about a loss of something. Then a loss of some things. Then a loss of all things.

Then he was already dead, some might say.

What do you mean, I might say back.

If he had already lost everything, some might say, then he was already dead.

Yes, I might say.

Then you didn't kill him, some might say as they move toward me.

That's not the point.

Then what is.

The doctor said he was sorry for our loss.

My brother said, You did the right thing.

Then a lot of serious shit happened in a lot of serious places. My mother drove to work. The doctor flipped a switch. My brother made coffee. The sun rose somewhere, set somewhere else. A brown recluse hunched in the dust.

And the truth is I don't always leave in the mornings.

Some mornings the guy wants to get to work, and so I have to leave, but the truth is I don't want to.

Some mornings I'm still lying in their beds, and they're like, You need to leave, and I just lie there staring at their backs.

Some mornings I note the ribcage. I note the organs seething beneath the ribcage. I note the fragility of what does not, at night, seem fragile.

Some mornings I am not the whore they want me to be.

I am not the killer they want me to be.

Some mornings I try to no avail. To absolutely no avail. To no avail I try, and they get up to make coffee, and I get up and step into my skirt, and I pull on my shirt, and I walk the shortest way home.

And the woman performs happy woman on a sunny street.

The woman performs this all feels good this all feels really good.

The woman pulls it together. She pulls it tight. She further tightens that which tightens.

There were late nights he would call from a payphone, a friend's house, a hospital, a halfway house, and because it was late, and because I was not poor, and because I was not ferociously mad, but, rather, mad mad, a machine answered my phone and lied that I wasn't there eating in bed, watching TV, lied that I would return the call.

The machine would then say, Hello, stranger.

The machine would then say, It's your father, stranger.

There were voices in the background.

There was traffic in the background.

I'm OK, stranger, the machine would then say.

There was screaming in the background.

There was me in my bedroom.

Pick up the phone, the machine would say loudly.

I know you're there, the machine would say louder.

There was me turning the TV all the way up.

There was every poor soul looking downward.

There was me not believing in the soul.

There was me waiting, counting seconds, staring at the wall.

My mother said goodbye and disconnected first. Then the doctor said goodbye and disconnected. After the doctor disconnected, there was silence, but I said, Hello. I was hoping my brother was still on the line. I wanted to laugh or something. I said hello again, but my brother had disconnected too.

And before I ran downstairs to the massive kitchen that was my kitchen, I sat on the edge of my bed, still holding the phone.

I imagined the doctor arriving home that morning.
I imagined the doctor taking off his scrubs, washing his hands, and
climbing into bed with his beautiful wife.

I imagined him easing into his wife's heat, the way I once eased into
my ex's heat.

Before we had a sense of what came next.

Before we had a sense that something came next.

Firefighting.

Warrensburg, Missouri.

Me in my bed eating cold lo mein.

Me eating egg rolls, watching TV.

There was no grand scheme.

You have to trust me.

I would quit my job. I would leave that shit hole. I would cross the
state line. I would cross another. I would cross another.

And here I am now in a different state.

And there is the man digging through the trash.

And there is the gem buried in the mess.

Listen. It was not a shit hole.

It was not that.

Call it what you will, but there were cowboys there, for God's sake.

standing on corners in the biggest hats you have ever seen.

There were tornadoes that would send you into space.

There were spiders that would necrotize your ass.

There was a sky turning light. The same sky as everywhere turning
light.

Call it what you will, but there I was, same as you were, under that
sky.

There I was just some poor soul. Same as you.

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DECEMBER, FEVER

by JOY KATZ

from PLOUGHSHARES

A tang approaches, like the smell of snow.
Illness like a color deepens—
pale gray, thick-in-a-cloak gray/secret coat silk,
and finally the weight of rough pelts heaped on the bed.

The last enchantment of the day is tearing pages out of a book.
The paper soft and thin, like falling asleep
(a hand backstage at school smoothing my hair;
a boy named Lakamp, who became an undertaker)
My baby laughs to rip the pages.
Stays by me, does this damage.
The tearing moves like voltage through my own hands.

Oh mother skimming fever

I need him to linger

are you still happening there, in your body?

I just want to lie at the edge of breaking.

Yes, I am still backstage, here in my body.
The baby pulls out another page—
leaving him would come this easily.