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## Sketches of My Dad

Heather Surls  
*College of DuPage*

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# Sketches of My Dad

Heather Surls

## *No. 1: Wind Turbines*

He meets me at the airport, every time a little different. This time his hair is gray and brown and thin, and he is wearing black jeans and just-purchased, copper-colored leather boots for yard work and chukar hunting. As we stand and wait for my bag, we talk. When I look at him, I see my nose on his face, like in my wedding pictures from three and a half years ago: broad and triangular, like a pyramid below its bridge.

We drive out of Los Angeles, grim, cemented city with fat ficus trees busting up the sidewalks, a blanket of pinkish-brown smog arranged around the foothills—the reverse of the commute he has driven for almost 15 years. We inch in traffic on the six-lane freeway, discuss Chinese fire drills, Rick Santorum, Tim Tebow, and Mid-East politics, cheat by taking the truck route.

The sun sets. We cross the first mountains, dip into the Antelope Valley. “What are all those lights?” I ask, gesturing toward a blinking red swath on the mountain ahead, the backside of my hometown.

“Wind turbines,” he tells me. Their presence isn’t new; I remember watching the small windmills with red and green tips when we drove through the pass when I was a child. But these turbines are enormous, and there are hundreds of them. A million dollars each, he tells me. All made in China, delivered to the fringe of the Mojave Desert on train cars.

“This used to be a beautiful drive,” he says, “but they’re ruining our desert. I don’t see how this is green.”

## *No. 2: Instant Coffee*

We sit on the couch in front of the TV, both holding coffee cups. This is why I get up early here—for one-on-one time with whoever’s up first. On our right, a bushy, 14-foot Christmas tree dominates the corner. (He and my brother lopped it off the top of a taller tree.) On the screen, ticker-tape below the reporter mentions Pakistan.

“We have some friends at our church who lived in Pakistan for 20 years,” I say, “and they lived in Abbottabad, the city where they found Osama bin Laden.”

“Really?” When he is surprised, his face softens and his shoulders turn toward me with a marionette-like jump, a twitch that travels down his arms to his fingers.

This is one of my prize stories, so I try to keep the details straight. “They said when they heard where he was found, they were like, ‘Oh, we know where that is.’ They talked about him like they knew him. They said he’s really tall—over six feet.”

I sip my coffee—Folger’s instant. My parents have been drinking it long enough that I remember changes in the packaging—once glass with a twist-on lid, now plastic with a pop-off lid. We know how it works in our family. In a cup of microwaved water (one minute, 30 seconds), a spoonful of freeze-dried granules

hisses slightly as it dissolves, then creates a creamy foam flecked with dark, un-dissolved spots. Today I drink it like I did when I started, with Coffee Mate, thick and corn-syrupy.

“So, Irish cream, not French vanilla?” I say, mentioning the lack of the old standby in the refrigerator.

“And hazelnut,” he adds. “I’ve been drinking this stuff for years, so I figured I’d have a variety.”

*No. 3: Lavender*

We can speak a special language together. He’s more fluent than I, but sometimes I can finish his sentences when he forgets the words. Sedum, Cotoneaster, Burning Bush, Pyracantha (technically *Pyracantha*, but the “i” always slips in). The January light is warm and healthy-feeling, stitching together vitamins under our skin as we survey the church grounds.

“We lost one there...and there,” he says, pointing out gaps in the line of cedars and Japanese pines on the property line. I walk behind him along the cinderblock wall, shuffling through piles of brown oak leaves. “I’ve thought about clearing the bottoms of those trees. They say one-third the height of the tree for fire clearance.”

He mentions the church work days he organized when I was a teenager. “Hank and Floyd are so on top of everything now,” he continues, “but I’m not sure I agree with that, you know? It’s like you lose...”

“The sense of community?”

“Yeah.”

He takes the leaf blower and protective headphones and blows leaves off the sidewalks. I clip dry stalks of Shasta daisies down to the ground. Then we trim lavender bushes and collect tumbleweeds together, smashing them into the garbage can, talking about the community garden concept. This is how he feels love—walking together, working together.

On the drive home, he fills the car with the scent of machine fuel—oil and gas mixed— and citrusy lavender. This is how he’s smelled for years.

*No. 4: Things I Do Not Understand*

At 4:10 a.m., my alarm sounds and I sit up on the air mattress in my childhood bedroom. A minute later, the door opens and he looks in. “Good morning, honey,” he says. “Morning,” I whisper back. I change my clothes, zip my suitcase. My stomach feels sour, the way it does without enough sleep.

He’s in the kitchen, standing near the stove, blue flame heating the stainless steel kettle. He asks if I want coffee. No, I’ll make chamomile tea. I sit on the hearth and tie my shoes, wish I’d left out a scarf to wrap my neck.

My bag clatters across the grooves in the wood floor, over the threshold, into the back of the Yaris. There’s supposed to be a meteor shower going on, so we stand in the driveway and watch. We’re both thinking of the one more than 10 years ago, when we looked out the windows of the house and saw stars falling every second—flashing, smudging, crumbling and tumbling down the sky. All six of us hauled blankets outside and laid in a row on the driveway to watch.

“Well,” I say, seeing nothing, “that was some night.” We climb in the car and head out on the dirt road.

We’ve made this drive many times, him dropping me off at school on the way to the fire station. The memories are good, living again this morning: our initial burst of conversation, kangaroo rats skittering across the highway in our headlights, him explaining things I don’t know or understand—that gas station is just a snack shop; all those semis are going to film a movie; once you have a garage, a battery recharger is a good investment to make.

The desert is dark, full of telephone poles and the ghosts of Joshua trees. Together, we see five shooting stars streak the sky.

## My First

William Vollrath

She surprised me  
at the checkout counter  
asking for my signature  
after the state society’s  
evening of readings and  
celebration of  
national poetry month  
My first sale of  
my first signed copy  
of my first real book  
When I told her  
it was a bit X-rated  
she giggled and said  
she could handle it  
then giggled more at  
my personalized signing  
It was fun meeting  
my first “groupie”  
after baring my soul  
at the well-known  
little bookstore  
I just didn’t expect her  
to be eighty