

Portrait of My Father

by Alexander Chee

His drink was Crown Royal, his candy bar, a Baby Ruth, though he didn't like chocolate much. He was good at poker, loved reading Tolstoy. His suits were bespoke.

In Korea, starting at the age of five, he ran barefoot in the snow when he was training for tae kwon do, so he was ready, during the Korean War, for when he and his oldest brother had to steal food from overturned army supply trucks, running the bags of rice home on their backs. After the war, he became the international tae kwon do champion in his age group at the age of eighteen, and captain of his college rugby team — the rice had helped two ways.

He left for the US while his father was away on business so he couldn't stop him. His mother gave him a gold belt buckle to sell when he arrived, as she couldn't give him money, and asked him, whatever he did, not to marry a blue-eyed, blonde-haired American girl.

He moved in with his oldest brother, a student by then at Georgetown Law, and then went to the University of Brownsville, living in Edinburg, TX, a few minutes away. He made his living teaching tae kwon do. I have a photo of him, flying through the air in a horseshoe kick, his legs and his arms stretched in front of him. He is breaking the boards they hold in the air with his snow-hardened feet.

He transferred after a year to Pomona College, for engineering, and his students sent him off to Azusa, CA, with a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. In his apartment building he found my mother, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American home economics teacher, working in the Los Angeles public school system, and living upstairs from him. He crashed a party she was throwing, a buffet beside the pool in the center of their building's courtyard. He lived with two other Korean engineering students and none of them could cook. She found him helping himself.

And you are, she said.

Chuck, he said. We go to the same church.

We do? she asked. I've never seen you there.

I enter from the side, he said. And stand in the back.

She accepted his offer of a ride that Sunday, and rode to church with him for months.

He was teaching tae kwon do in LA now, and had celebrity students: Peter Fonda, for example, who set him up with his sister, Jane, the same name as my mom. When he came home from dates, he saw her light on, and would knock, coming in to tell her how they went, and it was never very well. She herself had a boyfriend at Duke, very far away. On

her birthday, she received a dozen pink roses from the Duke man. And then my father appeared in her doorway.

Do you want to sit there and smell your roses, he said, or can I buy you a drink?

He took her to a jazz club, and as they entered, the band began to play Happy Birthday. The maitre'd brought them to a table in front of the stage, where a bottle of champagne sat on ice. As the band sang her name in the birthday song, she smiled and said, What would you have done if I said no?

And he said, But you didn't, and then he pulled out her chair.

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Questions to consider:

1. How is this essay structured?
2. What do the details tell about his father?
3. What do the mini-stories tell you about his father?
4. Why do you think he chose to use the dialogue he did put in the essay? What does it show/tell about the father?