

one story

The Husband

T Cooper

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So my daughter has become a son. She (or I suppose “he?”), is telling me this (*again?*), on the phone while I’m tucking in a white dress shirt and zipping up my fly before work. I’m late, and Gladys has probably already finished cleaning our first patient, who will be reclining there with the paper chain around his neck, flecks of gritty polish on his lips and cheeks, awaiting a final check up and futile suggestion from me that we snap a few X-rays before he goes.

“I miss Mom, too,” she says on a cell phone, walking somewhere.

“We aren’t talking about her,” I say. “I miss my daughter.”

“You can miss us both,” she says. “But only one of us actually died.”

“I have to get to work.”

Downstairs in the office (my commute shrunken from an hour via MetroNorth to seven floors down since I sold the house upstate), the first patient is indeed splayed across the seat,

perturbed at having to wait so long for me to release him from this hell. “I have a finance meeting in fifteen minutes,” he announces, and I lower his chair electronically.

“Let’s have a look.”

It appears as though he might eventually need to see a periodontist for some gum grafting, but it can wait a while. “Looks pretty good,” I lie. “So long as you come back in six months so we can measure that recession.”

He is sighing, unclipping his bib and sitting up, swinging his legs around. Hits his forehead on the overhead lamp. “I take it you are no friend of *Friends*,” I say, as Ross and Rachel argue over the rearing of their child on the small boxy TV mounted in the corner for patients to watch while recumbent. We have *Friends* and *Seinfeld* episodes on repeat. Some *Mad About You*, too—anything Upper East Sidey. Or maybe the latter are Upper West. Either way, most patients seem soothed by the DVDs as they are being scraped and drilled.

“We were starting to get worried about you, Doctor,” Gladys mumbles from underneath her surgical mask in the other room, where she’s already cheerfully at work on our 10 o’clock.

“A lot better things to worry about,” I say, snapping off my gloves and washing my hands in the sink. “Pirates, for instance. Or Darfur.”

Come lunch I settle into my office chair and do paperwork, which I normally despise. Insurance mishegas. But today it is welcome busy-work. When I started out, before the kids and before the invention of malpractice, my wife Delilah would meet me for lunch most days. Generally she would pack us lunch to eat in the park, to save money, but sometimes we splurged and went

out to a cafeteria or little ethnic restaurant. She always looked so nice and perfectly (though not self-consciously) put together. Especially against a backdrop of things falling apart, personal-accountability-wise, back in those days. Dressed down, everyone and everything dressed down. We never did that. I never took my tie off until bedtime. Not ever. I'm still like that.

We met in this way—the *most*, not to be confused with *best*, dressed in the room—at a party downtown in the Village, what was it, '65, '66? I remember the trade center towers weren't yet done, and I was just finishing my junior year. Delilah was up from the South, visiting a cousin at NYU. She couldn't have looked less New York if she'd actually been trying, and I'd simply never seen anything like her, perched on the roof's ledge like some perfect bird, haloed by blue cigarette smoke and the Woolworth tower over her shoulder. Those dark green eyes, that marvelous skin and hair. It took me precisely one year to convince her to come up to the city and marry me. I'm still not certain how I did. But before another summer had a chance to pass, I found us an apartment on East 38th a few blocks from Grand Central, and I couldn't believe my luck, living, eating and breathing in the same two small rooms as this beautiful girl.

Will you unzip me?

Likely the sexiest four words, when strung together, in the entire English language. And not sexy as in, intercourse sexy (you didn't just do that then the way they do now), but sexy as in the most carnal moment you might ever dream of being privileged to share. So lucky that she wants your (*your!*) clumsy sausage links for fingers fumbling with that strange little metal hook and then trusting you

to slide the delicate zipper down, being careful not to snag or tear the silky fabric anywhere along the way. Those zippers are nothing like the ones on trousers, couldn't be more different beasts.

The first time Delilah asked me that, so matter of fact and quiet, *Will you unzip me*, my lungs just about bottomed out on the floor of my abdomen. I somehow managed to cross our tiny, cramped bedroom and locate the shiny black tab at the base of her neck, where she was holding back a gorgeous flood of red hair while propped in the doorway to the bathroom. The hot water faucet constantly dripping its staccato beat—that slack landlord of ours, what was his name?—and the dingy checkered tiles begging for a little bleach.

My fingers wavered. We'd had intercourse more than a few times in the weeks since our wedding, and I had certainly been nervous each time. But this, this was something else. This was utter congress, this was we were shackled up, just the two of us with no one else ultimately to care, anonymous noises on the other side of an anemic common wall. This was, You're a man now, somehow blessed enough to wind up with a specimen such as this one standing before you, the pale, vulnerable canvas of her back gaping, no less stunning by being framed by a chipped tenement doorway. This was, You better tame those butter fingers and finish school so you can take care of her and every one of the tiny freckles on either side of her spine.

Which I believe I did to the best of my ability. Not that any of it matters anymore, now that she's gone.

At Lenox Hill Hospital, about a week before Delilah died, my daughter who is now a son came to visit. We hadn't seen her in six

or seven months. There had been no explosion, no specific wedge, just garden-variety attrition with a dash of avoidance. We were consumed with doctors and their various optimistic suggestions for treatment, and she was rarely in town. It wasn't her fault; nobody had communicated the direness of Delilah's situation until it was too late—to either of the kids, really.

The day of the unexpected visit, I had finally decided to log a few hours at the office to attend to a couple of antsy patients with wayward fillings that couldn't wait any longer, and when I came back up to catch the last of visiting hours, shaking the rain off my overcoat, the normally ornery nurse's smile caught me unawares.

"Your son was just here, so *sweet*," she cooed.

"My son lives in Wisconsin, he teaches at Madison."

"Oh. Well, I don't know. He was calling her 'Mom,'" she countered, almost protectively. "Such a gentleman, really."

"Maybe he flew in to surprise us," I offered. But I knew it had been my daughter, the only one capable of charming people like that. Somehow she'd timed the visit when I wasn't there. I hoped she hadn't upset her mother in any way.

But when I entered the room, Delilah was sleeping as soundly as was possible then, her head cocked toward the window, facing north. Her paleness a liability now. I touched her cheek with the back of a cold hand, wondering what my daughter might've said to her and where she sat when she said it. Did she hold a hand? Which one? Delilah's breath was labored, night-ward sour.

I was always certain I'd go first. In fact hoped for it. Especially with the prostate thing a couple years before. But I survived, thrived even, thanks to a new exercise regimen and diet, going alcohol-free, encouraged by my wife in every way. She even

discreetly reminded me to change the pads of my special undergarments to avoid unpleasant and embarrassing “accidents,” and located and purchased more comfortable and less bulky ones for me to wear to the office under my suit trousers. Caressed me for hours sometimes, until I’d feel even just a shred of those old stirrings. I’d felt positively wheel-chair bound, though I never, not once, saw that reflected on Delilah’s face.

I sat in the shadows on my usual chair in a corner of the room, watching my wife slip even further. Perhaps this “unexpected” visit had been unexpected only by me.

The widow from 4EF is back, this time with artichoke dip. She’s really not that unattractive, at least physically speaking. I have told her about the incomparable Delilah, I have told her about my somewhat irritating professor son, and even about my other bohemian “son,” who used to be a daughter. I have told her about the mild (but improving) impotence since the surgery. I could not be more unavailable. But still she persists, because she is lonely. I am lonely too, but I am not so inclined to do anything about it.

“*The Amazing Race* is on in five,” she says, peeking inside my apartment, looking this way and that. It is tidy and clean, as Lupe still comes twice a week, even since Delilah died, and even though I keep myself to precisely four small areas of the apartment, and four areas alone: the guest (now my) bedroom, the guest (now my) bath, the kitchen, and the reading chair in the northwest corner of the apartment.

“I have some paperwork I’m trying to finish up.” My third, maybe fourth lie of the day.

“Surely you can take a short break.” She pushes past me and

places the dip on the coffee table. The porcelain dish has two small, rounded carrots for handles. “They’re going to Africa this week.”

“This program makes no sense,” I say, trying to locate the remote in the sofa. “Such a waste of resources.”

“It’s just fun,” she chirps, sitting too close.

My daughter started bringing girlfriends around during college, and Delilah and I just assumed she was homosexual, even though she’d never said as much. Her hair was always very short, even as a kid. A tomboy people sometimes mistook for our younger son. Refused to go to Hebrew school or wear skirts, and lied to play on the pee-wee football team for two seasons—until she sprouted tiny breasts and was eventually sussed out by the coach. He showed up at our door one late fall evening with our little girl in tow, dirty-faced and gripping her helmet in a small fist with the shoulder pads and jersey over it the way the boys do. What were we supposed to do, put her on punishment?

I think Delilah felt she’d failed in some fundamentally female way. A few particularly vexing times she wondered aloud at this strange dark creature who had issued from her, from us, though she never stopped loving our daughter. Perhaps even more than our oldest. I wasn’t much involved in raising either of them—I set us up so Delilah could worry about that and that alone if she chose—but I did love them as well as I could. Provided for them, some might even say spoiled them. Those two never wanted for a thing, which couldn’t have been more different from my own upbringing. My father, had he lived to see, would’ve been impressed—or maybe disgusted, I could never decide which.

Our daughter followed her big brother to Brown (I covered

both tuitions for those eight years, not the most flush years of our life), and after that, we didn't see her much but for a few check-ins a year, or when I'd end up staying overnight at our apartment if a patient's procedure kept me late. (We let her live there for a couple years post-graduation—rents in the city were climbing then, even downtown.) While our oldest was well on his way to a PhD in anthropology, our daughter was playing in punk bands, performing all over the city and then the country, and eventually, with her current band The Coney Island Whitefish, all over the world. She played guitar and sang, up on stage the center of attention in her tailored men's suits and thin ties; come to think of it, she looked much like I must've when Delilah and I were courting.

It never added up to us, but she supported herself with the music, and sometimes clippings would show up in the mailbox, ripped from various glossy magazines whenever the band would release a new album. They played at Irving Plaza last year, and she invited us to come down to watch the show. Delilah wanted to go, finally to accept an invitation, so she accompanied me on the train for a day about the city, and later that night we crossed a messy line of bedraggled, world-weary-looking kids who were all presumably there to pay good money to see our daughter play her strange rock n' roll Klezmer. I felt a hundred, my undergarments—essentially adult diapers, “with a snug-fitting elastic blue trimmed waistband designed to look like regular underwear” and “worry-free odor control!”—crinkling beneath my pants, and Delilah squeezing my hand when the crowd later screamed wildly as our rakish daughter came on stage and sang her first note.

I wanted to leave after a few numbers, but when I caught a glimpse of my wife sitting straight backed at attention beside

me, lips parted and teeth glowing in those blazing candy-colored lights behind our youngest child, I knew I'd have to stay through the post-midnight finale—plus two encores I thought might never end. People were smoking cigarettes (and other things) backstage, and our daughter radiated heat laden with sweat when she hugged me close, high off of the approbation that seemed rather quotidian to her at that point.

Her band mates seemed delirious to meet us:

“He’s told us so much about you.”

“I can’t believe this is the first time you’ve seen him play live.”

“He killed tonight.”

I kept having to remind myself who “he” was, literally shaking the designation into my head upon every mention. Delilah ate it all up though, as buoyant as I'd seen her in ages. She got the diagnosis two months later, was dead another seven after that.

The widow from 4EF has broken me; I have somehow agreed to dinner and a movie with her the following weekend. The night before she had nattered non-stop, so even if I'd actually wanted to hear what was going on in the two terrible TV programs she forced me to watch, I would've been hard-pressed to know what was said while, for instance, the various oddly-matched and sometimes combatant couples skipped across Africa as though entire countries' borders were nothing more than alternately colored squares on a chess board. Pulling on my shoes the morning after, I can't recall whether I actually said yes to the widow, or if it was simply magically *decided* that we'd go out, the way some women (but not Delilah) do. Or like Delilah did. I make a mental note to cancel the next time I bump into the widow in the lobby.

There is a message from my daughter blinking on the machine; she wants to come by the apartment later to see me since she is in town between tours. I press “erase” and shrug on my coat by the front door, then head down to the office, where Gladys is dressed in a skirt that vaguely resembles a cross section of lasagna peeking out from under her white lab coat.

“Just a quick filling for Mrs. Ackers,” she says.

I scrub up and enter room one, where Ruth Ackers is lying clenched in that nervous posture of hers. She knew Delilah nominally, I think they had lunch a couple times over the years, served on a board of something or other together. I know she was at the funeral. The local is ready to go, resting on the tray beside her and I smile, pull up my mask, then gently shake the injection into her gum line. She doesn’t feel a thing and looks relieved, but I am thinking of the way people can just trap you like that, and then I am mindlessly re-shielding the needle before intending to dump it into the sharps container, and the needle is at once through the latex and deep into the pad of my left thumb. I haven’t made this mistake but one time before, back during the first year of dental school, and now Gladys has witnessed it all and is looking at me stunned and silent as I manage, “I’ll be right back,” and sidle out of the room to wash my hand in a different sink.

“Are you okay?” Gladys asks quietly from behind me, before I can peel off the glove. There are three small red circles ballooning under the rubber tip of my thumb, Mickey Mouse head-shaped.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” I say. My hand is trembling and I am as embarrassed as if I were standing before her in nothing but my incontinence undergarment. “I’m not even sure it got me,” I attempt, but it’s obviously not true.

Mrs. Ackers sits numbing on the other side of the wall while *Seinfeld* blasts too loud from the recessed speakers in the ceiling, and Gladys is probably wondering if we should ask her to be tested, per protocol.

“Doctor—?”

“It’s fine,” I bark, but as soon as I hear myself, I regret the tone.

I do not know how much longer I can do this, how much longer I should. And even more than whether to test Mrs. Ackers, Gladys is likely wondering the very same thing. I turn to say something that might make her worry less, but thankfully I don’t have to because Gladys is off, busily digging through an over-stuffed drawer in the supply closet down the hall. She would never say anything. She has never seen me like this. Nobody has, nobody living.

Later that evening, my daughter who is now a son is waiting for me in the lobby, talking shop about the Mets with Alex, the doorman. “Dad!” she says when she sees me. I don’t know why she seems so continually happy to see me. She slaps hands with Alex in that way fellows of a certain age and demeanor do, then joins me to wait for the elevator.

“How was your day?” I ask because I can’t think of anything else to say. Then: *shit*. It’s the widow, juggling two bags of groceries while Alex hands her a stack of mail.

“The good doctor!” she calls. “Hold the door.”

My daughter obeys and gestures to take her bags. The widow is coy and flattered.

“This is my—” I start.

“I’m Daniel,” my daughter says brightly, taking the bags.

“Oh, so... So *nice*,” she says, looking back and forth between

us. “How nice also to ride up together. I’m Doris, but I’m not even sure your father knows that.”

“I know your *name*,” I say, fake laughing. But I didn’t. Not her first name, not unless it is *The*, as in *The Widow*.

“It’s nice to meet you, Doris,” my daughter, *Daniel*, says. The doors open on the fourth floor, and she makes like she is going to carry the bags all the way to the widow’s door.

“No, it’s okay. I can manage,” the widow says, taking the bags back. The doors begin to hiss shut. “See you this weekend!”

My daughter looks at me.

“Oh shit,” I whisper to myself, “I forgot to cancel.”

“You have a date?”

“No, no, it was just a movie or some such. It wasn’t exactly set in stone.”

“It sounds fairly set in stone.” The doors open onto the seventh floor.

“After you,” I say, but she waits until I exit the elevator before following me down the hall to the apartment door.

Once inside all I want to do is be still. Beneath the dressing, my thumb is still raw from scrubbing. There’s a healthy stack of new journals I’d like to just sit down and plow through until late in the evening. My daughter makes her way into the living room like a first-time visitor might. She is wearing a nice slim three-button suit, I don’t know the brand.

“Thirsty?” I ask, hanging up my blazer and heading into the kitchen.

“I’m fine.”

After a few minutes I join her, and she looks admittedly stiff—the antithesis to how she does on stage or in the magazines—

sitting forward on the couch, elbows propped on knees, fingertips delicately matched.

“This is hard for me,” she says matter of factly.

She is brave where I am silent.

“I really need you to start trying to call me ‘Daniel,’” she begins then.

“Why?”

“Why?” she asks, pushing back into the couch now. “Why? Because I think it’s pretty obvious I’ve been living my life as a male for several years now, and it’s not like I’m hiding my past, but it’s also not really cool to persist in calling me ‘Sarah’ or ‘she’ when I look and sound like this.”

“I meant, why ‘Daniel’?”

She is confused. Pauses, considers. “Because it’s your dad’s name. Isn’t that obvious?”

“I didn’t think of it, no,” I say. And I haven’t. Nothing she’s done has seemed congruent with our family and how we live, so I wouldn’t presume.

“Well, that’s what it is.” She stands up, walks to the window and takes in the gray outside. There are no shadows. “Wow, Mom was right.”

I will not let her drag Delilah into this. “What’s that supposed to mean? Mom didn’t like this.”

“She was fine with it.”

“She was my wife, I am her husband, and I know she wasn’t *fine* with any of this.” I am considering what kind of drink I’d pour myself under different circumstances.

Now my daughter is pulling a letter out of her interior breast pocket. Unfolding it and holding it out to me. It’s Delilah’s hand,

and I don't want to see it. "Take it." The paper is shaking, which means her hands must be shaking, too. I look to see; they are in fact trembling, and unusually large, fingers blistered from the guitar-playing. "You're not going to read it?"

"It's not going to tell me anything I don't already know," I say.

"You're unbelievable."

"Am I?"

She folds the note and slips it back into her pocket. Sits down again, directly across from me on the coffee table. It's not made for sitting and groans. Her voice is deep, I hate to think about what she's done to make it so.

"Okay. Basically, Mom wrote that she loved and accepted me and was proud of me for being who I am. She said that next to leaving you because she was dying, it was the hardest thing she's ever had to do, but that she understood, and it made her love me more. She also said that you might never understand, but that she had great hope that you would some day. Mostly so you wouldn't be alone."

I don't believe a word of it.

"Want me to go on?"

No. I glance toward the north window.

"Okay then, she also said she thought you ultimately *would* be alone, but that I should nevertheless keep on you, should come around when I could, and make you do things like go on dates with nice ladies from down the hall, and try not to let you drift away completely. She told me to take care of you. Which I have to be honest, I didn't like the sound of, but I was certainly up for trying. But I now see it's an impossible task, taking care of you, so I don't know where that leaves us."

I am sitting there listening to all of this unlikeliness and all I am thinking is: *You don't have a penis, you don't have a penis, you don't have a penis.*

And she is too kind to say it, but she's probably sitting there thinking the same thing. Or certainly could be. And to that I might normally counter: "The fully-functional, blood-engorged penis does not make the man." At which point she could smile at me smugly, like *CASE CLOSED*—which is why I just want her to leave me alone, so I never have to delve into any of this in the first place, sending us down a path no reasonable father wants to tread with his goddam fucking *daughter*.

She was on tour in Germany when Delilah finally passed. The last time she'd seen her mother was in the hospital that day when I just missed her. She canceled shows and flew back straightaway for the funeral. She had a tall girl with perfect, white teeth with her at the cemetery, and they were generally recessive and quite respectful, but dressed impeccably, like Delilah and I used to, only probably more stylishly (not to mention more expensively).

After her older brother shoveled some dirt in the grave, my daughter shoveled some, too. And then she tossed a small black and white photograph down onto the coffin. I didn't notice much that day, but I noticed that thing fluttering down into the hole. I sometimes wonder what it was. But I would never ask.

I probably should've been spending my morning considering whether Mrs. Ackers was concealing some secret life involving incredibly young and attractive, possibly HIV-positive gigolos. Instead I found myself obsessing over whether the *You don't have*

a penis conversation was real or imagined. So when I excuse myself from a patient and take the call from my daughter in my office, I'm hoping the very existence of the call is indicative that the penis madness had indeed remained within the confines of my skull. There is so much I would never do, and so much she (like Delilah), would and does do. Like phoning me after the way I acted.

"You didn't cancel with Doris, did you?" she asks as soon as I pick up.

"Who?"

"Doris."

"Oh. No, I haven't yet."

"Good. I ran into her in the lobby on the way out, and she asked me to join you guys on Saturday. Like a double-date."

I'm going to assume we're all clear on the imaginary penis conversation, but now I have a much larger problem to attend to. This couldn't have been what Delilah meant by "taking care" of me.

"Dad?"

"I don't know, Sarah."

"*Daniel.*"

"I don't know, Daniel."

We are at a strange, dark and suffocatingly crowded restaurant near the Flatiron, with tan-skinned waiters in Nehru-collared coats whisking about, while my daughter is welcomed like a movie star by an attractive young woman who looks like a model ripped from the latest issue of *Vogue*. She seats us at a large booth in the back, probably the nicest table in the place. It is quite loud.

For the widow this is a second swipe at prom night, but I cannot figure why she would want to go out with me when I don't want

to go out with her, and she knows it. My daughter takes off the widow's coat and hands it to the hostess, then removes her date's cover-up and does the same. She pulls out two chairs like she's done it a million times before, and the women sit, smiling. I am left standing.

"Join us," my daughter's date says up to me, but it is not an order. It's the same girl from before, with the perfect teeth.

"I'm sorry I didn't meet you at the funeral," I lean in to tell her, while reluctantly lowering myself into the seat. She seems nice enough. There's something about her, a pin-up aura, classically pretty, almost Delilah-pretty. *Almost*. I add: "You understand. I was in a fugue."

"*Was* in a fugue?" the widow gags, and they are all laughing. At me.

Napkins placed in our laps, drinks on the way. Something healthily "infused" and non-alcoholic for me. Every sinew of my creature wants to get up, go outside, and hail a cab uptown, but already some appetizers are steaming before us, humid curry flavors fill my nostrils, and now I'm wondering not only what the widow wants with me, but also what this pretty girl with the white teeth and pretty smile could possibly want with my daughter. We begin to eat.

I manage to nod my head that *Yes, it's so delicious*, and they are all having a grand old time, talking about ragtime and movies and what their audition tapes for *The Amazing Race* might look like. My daughter's and her girl's would involve music and fashion design, because that is what the girl does, and now they are wondering what mine and the widow's might be. Something involving helping people across the world with dental emergencies and teaching underprivileged kids math. I didn't know the widow

had been a teacher, and now my daughter is inquiring all about it and they are all just talking back and forth like normal people do on double-dates, I suppose. Except for the fact that one-fourth of the equation is conspicuously absent.

By dessert, my daughter is reclined a bit and rests a square hand on the pretty girl's pale, bare shoulder. I notice the fingers lightly tickling under the strap of an old-fashioned looking dress. Proprietary. She is a handsome fellow, my daughter, no mystery there. The only mystery is why nobody sees or seems to care about what else I see sitting across the table from me; I certainly didn't change a lot of diapers in my day, but I sure as hell always knew what was under them.

They kiss, and I turn toward the widow. "Are we done here?" But she doesn't respond, just looks to my daughter for the answer.

"What's the rush, Dad?" But it's not really a question. My daughter's eyes linger on the girl.

I try to hand a credit card to a passing waiter, but he looks at me as though I have just insulted his mother.

"It's covered," my daughter says. "No worries."

I don't know whether the bill has been comped or my daughter has quietly taken care of it, and I am suddenly tired, sitting there beholden, when it was the last thing on Earth I wanted to be. To anybody.

After dinner we go our separate ways, uptown and down. The widow hugs and kisses my daughter and her girl, at least twice each, as I hold the taxi door open, corners of my coat flapping in a quiet wind. The protracted good-byes of unexpected new acquaintances, who don't know how long it'll be until next time, or if ever. I just want to go. I shake my daughter's hand when it's

offered, and she slams the cab door behind us. I watch her turn then to the pretty girl and kiss a temple, putting an arm around her as our car speeds away, our necks jerking.

“Please come inside with me,” the widow says, just like that, when the elevator opens onto the fourth floor.

I cannot respond.

“I know,” she says softly.

She is persistent, and soon we are sitting on a day bed beside a large window, sirens headed for Lenox Hill periodically shrieking beneath us. She lightly caresses the hair above my ears while we talk. “He’s lovely,” she says of Daniel. “You should be proud,” she also says. But that is all I hear, because an unrelenting pulsing has emerged, but not where one might hope or expect. Instead it is directly under where she is touching my temples. She won’t stop even though it’s obvious I do not want to be there sitting with her. She lingers, so bold as to kiss a few of my fingertips, and I lay back on an undeniably comfortable pillow and worry, despite the advertised guarantee, that my shifting will release a trace of humiliating odor.

Meanwhile somewhere south of here, at this very moment, he is probably unzipping her out of that lovely dress, the kind that still needs unzipping. Only he knows he can take his time with the zipper, that she will wait all night if it takes him that long to get it all the way down, with fingers far more capable and confident than my own, even now.