When I was younger, I used to sneak into my father’s studio and flip through his sketchbooks. Not that I really needed to *sneak*, I suppose; I’m sure he would have shown them to me gladly, but somehow I always felt the thrill of espionage whenever I crept into the room bent on pilfering through his drawings. His studio was not particularly out of the ordinary for most New England rooms- creaky hardwood floor, large windows, decorative windowsills, tall ceilings- except for the exotic colors on the walls. When he first painted the room, I was skeptical.

“Dad,” I remember saying, “This looks kind of funny. Why don’t you paint all the walls the same color?” He, brimming with parental wisdom, decided not to criticize me in the lofty heights of my twelve year old artistry, but instead answered simply:

“I like it. It inspires me.” He pointed to the east wall, painted a light green-blue. “That reminds me of the Caribbean. That wall—” he motioned to the west wall, a cool periwinkle, “reminds me to be calm, and that one, the green one, makes me think of plants and potential.” I nodded towards the final wall, left white.

“And that one, Dad?”

“Ahhhh, that one. That one reminds me to be normal.” He smiled, and wheeled his swivel chair back to the easel to continue adding purple to a particularly large shadow in his illustration.

Indeed, the studio was a room bubbling with creativity, even when my father left it to help fix dinner or work outside. It was in these moments of vacancy that I would creep in on my clandestine mission to open his sketchbooks, showcasing his mind and talent to me, his daughter.
The sketchbooks stood at attention on a shelf next to the door. They were slotted next to each other as tightly and neatly as matchsticks. Hesitating, I would draw my fingers almost luxuriously across the spines, feeling the skin of each book. The leather bound sketchbooks were usually too serious, and often empty. I realized later, when I received my first Italian leather journal, that my father was probably just as hesitant to mark those lofty and beautiful pages as I was to write my own thoughts in such a formidable book. The spiral bound ones were fun, but difficult to remove from the shelf, and many of the pages were missing, torn out to serve as grocery lists or paper airplanes. My favorites were the paper bound journals, with their heavy crackling spines, pages bending lazily. It was in these that my father wrote most of his stories, and where his fast, detailed sketches drew their first breaths.

Many times when I looked through my father’s drawings, I was at a loss as to what they actually were. Some pages were merely a mosaic of alternately-sized squares with unrecognizable sketches capturing ideas for future canvases. Others were a tangle of figure drawings, jotted down at various concerts and ceremonies where he would bring a pencil and a book, scribbling unique facial expressions and poses from the performers. Turning the pages of my father’s sketchbook quite literally took my breath away: I would flip from a chore chart surrounded by small doodles to an intensely captivating portrait of a woman with dark, curling hair to a sheet full of zany character sketches. Perhaps it was the delicious juxtaposition of monotony and beauty that made my father’s sketchbooks so alluring.

One day, sitting in his worn maroon swivel chair, I turned the page of one sketchbook and found a few lines of notes next to one or two light drawings; nothing out of the ordinary. I almost continued perusing, when my eyes caught the first few words of the paragraph. I blinked. What was I reading? In my dad’s half-cursive handwriting, in thin pencil, he had written: I am sad. Instinctively, I flipped to the front of the notebook, searching for the date on the cover. Had he really written this recently? Surely not... There it was, a dark scribble declaring the sketchbook to be two years old. My stomach contracted. That recent? I whipped back to the paragraph and continued reading.
I am sad. I have not really talked to Karen in days. The kids are always busy, and she works so hard for them. I need to spend more time with my family. I cannot draw anymore.

I stared at the slanting words, stared until my eyes hurt and the page slipped out of focus. I felt embarrassed, embarrassed for plummeting so suddenly into the deepest intimacies of my father’s life, embarrassed for absorbing my mother’s precious time those two years ago, embarrassed for being ignorant to her sacrifices for me, and embarrassed that, for the first time, I realized that my father was capable of feeling shame and sadness and failure, just as I was. Why hadn’t I considered that before? I wondered. The naiveté of my presumptions about adulthood glared out at me from the sketchbook like a sickly bruise.

The possibility that my father was not invincible shocked and softened me. That small paragraph in the notebook helped me understand the long, silent days when tension settled over our house, sending the children scurrying into the basement to avoid the heavy looks from our parents. Those few words I am sad meant that when I rode in the car, I told Dad about biology class. It meant that I asked him about his mission in France, about traveling with my grandfather through Europe in a Volvo stationwagon, about bouncing a soccer ball off the back of his barn in Utah until he was agile enough to start a club team. I began to hug my father when I left the house. I wrote notes to him when he was sad. I gave him honest opinions on his paintings. I tried to do the dishes.

When I was six years old, I would arm wrestle with Dad. He would clasp my hand across our white table, his large palm smothering mine, and I’d count; one, two, three, go! I’d push and twist and strain—I was so close every time! At the last minute, my father, with a violently quaking arm, would barely manage to push my hand to the table. Breathing heavily, he would stretch out his exhausted bicep, wipe his forehead with his trusty pocket handkerchief and pour himself a glass of water.

“My goodness, Jessie,” he’d say, blowing out a puff of tired air, “You are a strong little girl!” I’d beam, happy to see him tired but triumphant, as always. I don’t remember the actual day I realized that his struggle was all an act, but I do recall that it was an embarrassing number of years after the last of our arm wrestling tournaments.
I think about that now, reading those words: I am sad... I cannot draw anymore. Was my triumphant father defeated? It was like discovering the reality behind the Easter bunny, but drastically worse because the Easter bunny didn’t make me cream of wheat with lots of brown sugar in the morning, or sing me *Edelweiss* before I went to bed. In a despairingly blunt way, through a handful of scribbled words on a page, I realized that adulthood was just as flawed as childhood. I realized that when my Dad was fed up with my younger brothers and shouted, or that when he got angry with his art editors, he was making mistakes. My rose colored glasses lay bent and tangled on the floor.

Yet somehow, this made my father infinitely more wonderful. Suddenly, when he comforted me after a humiliating skiing trip or spent time creating an archaeology dig in the backyard with my little brother, he was making these choices proactively to love us. His decisions for good suddenly became decisions against evil, not decisions that had been already made for him upon entering the austere and predetermined Path of Parenthood that I had previously envisioned. No- my father had become an agent.

Two days before I left for college, my family went to Scarborough Beach in the evening. Even though it was August, the air hung heavy and cool over the green swells of the Maine ocean. We played Frisbee, splashed in the chilly waters, ate carrot sticks and homemade turkey-hummus wraps, kicked up the sand. With no one speaking of my bizarre upcoming departure, time moved easily.

When our bodies started to prickle painfully because of the wind, we began packing up. Dad and I were the slowest, folding the blue picnic blanket gently while the rest of my brothers grabbed the sand toys and ran to the boardwalk with my mother. The waves were beautiful, heavy and crashing. I looked out across the ocean, my ocean. This was where I learned to surf, where I had made sandcastles complete with flying buttresses and bell towers, where I had played in the hurricane waves for hours, where I had engaged in cutthroat games of Frisbee and Pickle, where I had walked with my family, collecting shells and rocks, looking for blue bottle necks. Heaving out a deep sigh, I turned back to my father, holding the already folded blanket, and was taken aback by his face- his light blue eyes were half- closed and tears were running down his cheeks. Saying
nothing, he simply reached out to me, pulled me into his tan leather jacket. My face pressed against his ribcage and I could feel the heavy swells of his breath.

“It’s always felt not quite right at the airport after your brother left. And now, well, now I guess the beach is going to be the same way. It’s just not going to be the same without you.” The wind bit my cold face, and we wept together. I wonder if it was his way of letting go while welcoming me into adulthood, which he knew to be as twisted and bitter and triumphant as the past eighteen years of my life had been. You see? He was saying, there is sadness in this part of the journey too. There is sadness and there are mistakes, but more importantly, there is joy. And love. And growing. I was his child, the little girl who arm wrestled him, the young teenager who was thrust into a sudden understanding of his imperfection, and the near adult who was overwhelmed by his choices to love and bless his family. I was his daughter, crafted by him and my mother together, the accumulation of their wisdom, and here I was, ready to leave, and make my own adult mistakes. I had my own sketchbooks to fill with adventure and disappointment, my own pains to experience, my own triumphs to have. I was my own agent. The air was cold on my face, but wrapped in my father’s arms, I felt ready.