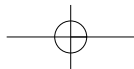
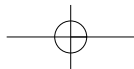
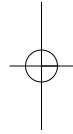


And This Is True





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EMILY MACKIE


SCEPTRE

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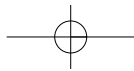
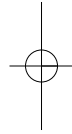
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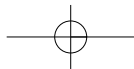
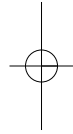
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For my mum





1

You have to start with a bang, he said. He clapped his hands together when he said it. BANG, like that. You've got to make people want to read what you have to say, otherwise they're not going to stay interested. They'll put you down and go make themselves a cup of tea and then they'll never come back. No chance. If you want to be a writer, boy – he said – you've got to grip people by the throat and shake them in those first few seconds. Shake them hard like you're never going to let them go. Then they'll be so dazed they'll have to read on. There'll be no time for tea. No thoughts of anything except reading your story.

I kissed my father once; when he was sleeping. It happened in the van. He'd been lying with his head cocked back and his mouth slightly open. Out for the count. I called his name softly and then more loudly and then louder still, but nothing. It was funny. I guess I thought it was some kind of a game to see what it would take to wake him up. I crawled across the van and poked him in the side.

‘Marshall.’

He didn’t even flinch. With thumb and forefinger I separated a couple of hairs from his head and tweaked hard. The hairs came away but Marshall slept on. I touched his face. Nothing. I stroked his nose. Nothing. I kissed him. An experiment. He didn’t even move or grunt or attempt to roll over. I kissed him again. Nothing. I could smell the pea soup we’d eaten only an hour or two before still on his breath and in his beard. I could taste the salt from his lips. I closed my eyes and held our mouths together. I’m drinking you, I thought. When I opened my eyes again Marshall was still asleep. His breath was slow and deep, unwavering.

‘Marshall?’

He didn’t move.

When my father wrote, he sat hunched over his jotter, continually frowning while he scribbled out his fits of inspiration. My father always frowned with great intensity whenever he wrote. He leaned into the page as though waiting for it to grow teeth and bite off his head; when eventually he did come up for air, to straighten his back or stretch out his legs, his face certainly seemed chewed somehow. My father would be chewed and then spat back out by his own writing. He did not devour the words so much as let the words devour him. But perhaps that is the making of a good writer.

When my father wrote, he squeezed the pen so tightly his hand cramped up. A painful knotted ache, he said. He had to stop for a while, shake it out, massage his knuckles. There is a hardened wart-like lump on his middle finger where the pen pressed in. When I think of my father writing, all tense and bent up over his paper, I think of that lump. It contains every word he's ever written. I can see them all squeezed up in there, jam-packed, tight. It's waiting to burst, I think, explode and spill out over the paper, onto the floor. Those words want to take over. I imagine them filling up the van like water. They're in my mouth, my nostrils. We're breathing them in.

I didn't just kiss him once. That was a lie. I kissed him several times. But only once when he was awake.