

**THE  
GLASS  
EYE**

*a memoir*

**JEANNIE VANASCO**



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*The hero is a feeling, a man seen  
As if the eye was an emotion,  
As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
In the object seen . . .*

From "Examination of the Hero in a Time  
of War" by Wallace Stevens

My parents raised me in a white-sided saltbox house, the sort children draw in crayon. Years before we lived there, it had been cut in half and moved across town. We never learned why.



## PART ONE



## ONE

The night before he died, I promised my dad I would write a book for him. I was harboring profound confidence charged with profound grief.

The day after he died, I was supposed to turn in a paper about *Hamlet*. My professor granted me an extension. I focused on the development of Hamlet's grief for his father, and the question of madness.

One week after he died, I was supposed to take a sociology exam. My professor did not grant me an extension. I did not read the chapter about grief, though I answered the questions about grief correctly.

One month after he died, I wrote on my arms and legs until they turned black: "before I lost him he lost his left eye I left his left eye he is not his glass eye the i left him."

Nine years after he died, in an attempt to organize my thoughts, I started keeping several color-coded binders labeled "Dad,"

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“Mom,” “Jeanne,” and “Mental Illness.” Within each binder are categories, such as “Vision” and “Voice.” “Jeannie” isn’t a binder. I’m “Mental Illness.”

## DAD

I remember almost nothing from before my dad lost vision in his left eye—as if my life begins there. Years of my life appear full of shadows, but the night I disappeared is full of light.

My parents and I were playing the Memory Game. The goal was to find among all the cards two that matched. I was four. It was my dad's turn.

I waited what felt like a long time for him to choose a card as he closed one eye, then the other. When the right eye closed I disappeared.

“I close my right eye,” he told my mom, “and I can't see Jean-nie.”

I closed my left eye, then my right, a game of illusions that moved objects, moving my dad an inch each time.

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In photos, my dad is almost always looking at me, never at the camera. This made it hard to choose his obituary photo. In the newspaper, my mom and I were cropped out of it.

In the original photo, the three of us are at the kitchen table. My dad is sixty-six, my mom is forty-six, and I'm four. In a month,

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at that same wooden table, his left eye will stop working, but in the photo his eyes are fine—a deep brown so piercing they seem to look right inside me and know me. What hair he has is white and blends in with the white curtains behind him. His olive skin shows wrinkles. His forehead and cheeks have a greasy shine. He looks strong, thick-waisted but not fat. He wears belted gray slacks and a crisp white button-down shirt. Underneath his shirt likely hangs his gold necklace of the Holy Family. He stands behind my mom, leaning in and smiling. She’s smiling too and holding me on her lap. With her clear tan skin and thick curly blonde hair, she looks young enough, is young enough, to be his daughter.

And then there’s me. At four years old, I want—or will remember wanting—one blue eye the shade of my mom’s, and one brown eye the shade that my dad and I share. But in a month, his eye doctor will tell me, “You have your dad’s eyes,” and I’ll never want a blue eye again. My wavy brown hair is pulled into a ponytail tied with a blue ribbon. My dad likely tied that ribbon. When I was a child, he did my hair—trimmed, brushed, and often braided it. He’d been a barber when he was young, and throughout my childhood he seemed young.

Worried that other children would tease me about his age, he tried to color his hair dark brown the year I started kindergarten; it turned deep red, and until it faded he wore a hat everywhere—including at home.

## MOM

Almost every day my mom and I talk on the phone, and almost every day we talk about my dad. He finds his way into the

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conversation, or rather we lead him there: “I remember this one time your father . . .” “How did Dad tell the story . . .” “I wish I could have him back.”

She still lives in Sandusky, Ohio, in the house he died in. I live in New York, not far from the house where he was born.

“You only wanted him,” my mom says. “You wouldn’t stop crying unless you had him. You wouldn’t let me put you to bed, read you stories. You were with him all day. You were used to him. I’d call from work and ask what he was doing. ‘I’m making Jeannie animals out of paper.’ Or ‘I’m teaching Jeannie how to twirl spaghetti.’”

She pauses. “He saw how unhappy I was. ‘She needs her mother,’ he told me. So I agreed to quit working. You were a year old. I was worried about money, but he said we could make do on his retirement and Social Security.”

And we did. No one could say I did without. I had dogs and turtles and bunnies. I attended private school. I practiced ballet at a dance studio near the lake, learned how to paint fish and birds on Saturdays in an artist’s home. Every month, I accompanied my dad to the bank where he bought savings bonds in my name.

“For your college someday,” he said.

### DAD

I remember only one visit to my dad’s eye doctor—though my mom tells me there were more.

My dad sat in the middle of a white room, peering into a coal-black lens machine with his left eye. A circle of lights shone over him. I stayed at my mom’s feet with a coloring book.

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His doctor leaned cautiously into him, prodding the eye with a wand of light.

The doctor left the room and returned with a nurse. She motioned for me to follow her into the hallway. I did, and she closed the door behind us.

“Your grandfather is a brave man,” she said.

She told me to stay where I was and disappeared into another room before I could say, “He’s my dad.”

I cracked open the door and looked at him. The doctor was pressing a needle into my dad’s eye, and my dad didn’t flinch.

MOM

“How did Dad accept the loss of his eye?” I ask my mom. “Did he accept it?”

“Yes, I think so. I don’t know if you remember how he used to throw up constantly and couldn’t walk up and down the steps. We had that sofa bed in the living room and he had to sleep down there all the time. It was like a pressure that built in his eye. He either had to live with it or have the eye taken out. So he said, ‘Let’s have the eye taken out.’”

I remember the hospital felt a long way from home.

I remember we stopped on the way and ate hamburgers in what used to be a bank. Chandeliers hung above us.

“Do you remember the priest in his room, the other patient?” she asks.

“No.”

“The priest told your dad, ‘I don’t know if I could accept that,’ and your dad said, ‘Well, what difference does it make if I

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accept it? It's not going to change it.' He was very brave about it. Your dad was very brave."

### DAD

Almost every week when I was a child, my parents either walked or drove me to the library, a turreted limestone building. One small room, on the grown-up side, featured a glass floor.

"You won't fall through," my parents took turns promising.

My dad would offer me his hand, and I'd tap my foot against the glass and say something like, "Next time."

But I wanted to walk bravely across the glass. And I want to say his loss of his left eye gave me courage. I knew his surgery meant he was brave, because that's what his nurses and doctors told me.

But I forget my immediate feelings about conquering the glass floor, about seeing—for the first time—the room's books about wars, physics, and clouds. I remember, though, waving at my dad from across the room, and returning to him.

### MOM

"Degenerative eye disease, maybe?" my mom says on the phone. "Advanced glaucoma? The doctor said it happens to something like one in a million people."

"What happened exactly?"

"Your dad's tear ducts were closed and clotted with blood, and the doctors couldn't get them to drain. I don't know what you call it."

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“Try to remember.”

“I can’t.”

DAD

Not long after he lost his eye, I lost one of my front teeth. My parents told me to put it underneath my pillow.

For the tooth fairy, they said.

In the morning, instead of my tooth I found a one-hundred-dollar bill. I ran down the steps, two at a time.

“The tooth fairy gave me a hundred dollars!” I shouted.

My parents exchanged looks.

“Wow,” my mom said. “I bet the tooth fairy thought she gave you ten dollars.”

My dad opened his wallet.

“Her mistake,” I said.

MOM

He built me toys and shelves.

“He wanted to prove himself,” my mom says after I call again, asking about his eye. “One morning—this was a few weeks after his surgery—he started building you a dollhouse. I was washing dishes when he came inside with a piece of wood stuck in his stomach. ‘I almost lost my hand,’ he told me. You weren’t there. You were in school.”

“Was it serious?” I ask.

“The wood wasn’t in deep. I helped him pull it out. But it hurt his confidence.”

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At our next garage sale, his saw shared a table with clothes I'd outgrown. I was assigning prices with our sticker gun.

"How much for the saw?" I asked him.

The question seemed so inconsequential then.

### DAD

I watched a woman paint my dad's new eye. Spools of red thread, shiny blades, small jars of paint, and brushes thinner than my watercolor brushes were arranged on her long desk.

It was important the new eye look like, rather than be, an exact match, because no one's eyes match perfectly.

As she painted, she looked at my dad's real eye, then down at the glass eye, then back at his real eye.

"What do you think?" she asked me when it was finished.

I looked at my dad, then down at his new eye.

### MOM

I call my mom again.

"Am I remembering right?" I ask her. "Did I watch someone paint Dad's new eye?"

"You watched," my mom says. "And I remember what you said when it was done: 'It looks real.'"

### DAD

"I can't see out of my left eye," I told him after he received his glass eye. "Do you think I need a glass eye?"

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“Are you lying?” he asked gently.

“I want to be like you,” I said.