The Accident

"I'll bet he was in a really bad car accident," my brother said. "Like maybe he was going
drag racing down some back road with his friends, like he always tells us about, and maybe he
was the guy in the wrong lane, and he couldn't get out of the way in time! I bet that's what
happened. He was probably going like ninety miles per hour too! And I bet they hit head on and
he got hurt real bad." My brother and I were sitting up in our tree house, speculating about our
Dad. More specifically, we were speculating about his foot; the one with the ugly scar that ran all
the way up his leg, to his knee. And since I was ten and my brother twelve, and my dad had
never talked about it, we were trying to figure it out ourselves. I guess we thought that it was just
more fun to try to figure it out, than to have him tell us the answer. Otherwise we would
probably long ago have just asked him.

"No it wasn't a car accident and you know it!" I retorted. Dad's much too good a driver to
get in a car accident, and besides, you know he's told us that he's never been in one before."
"Well then what do you think it was?" my brother asked. "I'm pretty sure that it happened when
he was playing a high school football game. I bet he was the high school quarterback, and one of
his O-linemen let off their block, and he got sacked. And the guy who tackled him probably gave
him an illegal hit, and broke up his whole leg while he was at it!" I was letting my mind wander
back to the professional football games that I'd seen, and was beginning to throw out all the cool
plays that I had heard them make. Unfortunately, my older brother knew it, and he cut me off,
"No, that's not it either. You're really just making stuff up now!" But how were we supposed to
know? Finally we gave up. We would ask our dad what had happened. "You do it," my brother said, you're younger so he'll probably answer you." And so finally I did. But neither me, nor my brother ever could have imagined that what he would tell us had happened.

"Son" my dad said, “I was only four years old when this happened to me." He pointed to his right foot, and the nasty scar that ran all over the top of his foot and up his leg. "So if you really want to know what made my leg this way, you also need to know that you're not too young for something terrible to happen to yourself."

"As I've told you before I grew up on a large dairy farm in Wisconsin. As a kid I loved the farm, and me and my older brother were always finding new and exciting ways of spending our time. And since I was still pretty little, and my brother was eight years older than me, I would always just let him decide what we should do. I looked up to him and took everything that he said as gospel. But in the end this turned out to be a detrimental flaw for me, since often I was actually too small to be doing whatever we were doing together."

"So on the morning of the accident I had gone looking for my brother to see what he was up to, but like I said, I had no sense of when I should not and could not do whatever my brother may have been doing.” As he spoke, I saw a faraway look come into my father's eyes and I knew that he could see it like it had only happened yesterday. After a pause my dad continued, "I assumed he would be over in the largest cow barn, so I headed over there to see if I could find him. There he was, and it looked like he had found an exciting new activity."

"Now in every large milking parlor there is a trough that runs behind all of the stanchions to collect the manure, and in this gutter is a long chain that runs along the entire length. The chain is powered by a strong motor that pulls it along like a simple conveyor belt. The moving
chain then pulls the manure along with it and dumps it at the end before it goes through the motor. However, after the cows are all out for the day, and all of the manure has been removed, the chain continues to run. Seeing the chain just steadily moving along must have eventually convinced my brother that he too could ride the chain along. So of course he had tried it, it had worked, and now he was having a great time. At first I was too scared, but after watching my brother a few more times, and hearing his non-stop encouraging that I would surely manage, I finally gave in."

Here my father paused, and I think that he was wondering why he had even started to tell me. I don’t think he had ever talked much about it, yet here he was, telling it all to his ten year old son. All I knew was that to Dad this was not easy to talk about, but at this point I still couldn’t figure out why. It seemed to me like he was just telling me another of his stories about growing up on the farm. But he was talking again.

"My brother had finally convinced me to hop on the moving chain, just like he was doing. But in his certainty that I could do whatever he could do, my brother had overlooked that I really was only four, and that I actually had no clue what exactly he was doing. But because we were just kids, and I had always trusted everything that he had ever told me to do, I went ahead and hopped on the chain. My brother was right! It was a blast! I was happy that I had finally overcome my initial fears and joined him."

"But as the chain pulled my steadily closer and closer to the powerful motor, and the cogs which the chain wound itself around, it never crossed my four-year-old mind that jumping off of the chain by the motor was not going to be good enough; I would have to jump off of it before it went under the guard, in front of the motor."
By this time I almost expected my father's pause, and I looked up at him when he stopped speaking. He was looking off into nothing. His eyes were clouded now like I had never remembered seeing. He clenched his jaw and I was scared by how unnatural his face looked. Now I know that in that moment, my father was wrestling with questions he'd thought about hundreds of times in his life: Why had he ever gotten on that chain? Why hadn't he jumped off sooner? In those few seconds, my father was once again reliving those fateful moments that had changed his life forever, when he was only four years old.

"The chain pulled me right up to the guard, but still I did not jump off, thinking that I still had a bit of time before the motor. As I heard my brother's sudden scream, I felt my foot being pulled into a painfully tight space, and the next second I felt only excruciating pain and a tugging feeling that I was later told was the ripping of flesh. I must have passed out from the pain as the motor and chain continued to grind away at my leg, because the next thing I remember is being in the hospital. I stayed there for over a month, while doctors performed skin grafts and other procedures, to try to replace all that had been ripped away... Occasionally I'll still feel a severe stab of pain, and I have never walked completely pain-free since that day."

When my dad finished telling me he was quiet for a long time, and he looked almost pained at having to relive that horrible experience again. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I still sometimes wonder if there isn't more to the story that he never told me. Was it really just a terrible accident that is so hard for my dad to think and talk about? I wonder what else took place in his relationship with his brother before that day, or what else he remembers from the accident that makes it so bad. Knowing my dad, I don’t think that he actually told me the truth when he said that he 'passed out from the pain', but what then did he experience that he won't talk about with anyone? Never since that day have I seen my dad just stare off into space
while he thought about something. Sometimes, even if I try, I can't stop wondering what else there is to the story.

Maybe he was actually left in the barn for a long time, with the machine grinding away, while his brother ran for help. And so while his brother was gone my Dad must have just lay there and submitted to the grinding motor. Could he have even watched what was happening to his leg, as flesh was continuously ripped away? How long could it have been that he lay there, while he waited for help to come? And suppose his brother, only twelve years old, and the only person there had, understandably, been overcome by shock, and not been able to get help right away? Imagine the guilt that he must have felt, and maybe still feels about roping my dad into his game. So even though I'll never know exactly what happened then, I can certainly imagine that it could have been pretty terrible and pretty scarring for a four year old kid.

I also wonder, from my Dad's point of view, how he must have felt, trying to tell his ten year old son of the terrible experience he had as a kid. I'm sure that he actually wanted me to know about the influence that I could have on my little brother, but at the same time he was forced to relive what may be one of the darkest parts of his memory. So it's not like I'm upset or disappointed in my Dad for not telling me the truth. After all, maybe it was the truth, and I am simply misreading my Dad's body language. Or maybe he didn’t want his ten year old son to have to know everything that happened. All I know is that if there is something that he was trying to hide, it is probably a terrible experience, and I can't really blame my Dad for not wanting to go there in his mind more than he had to.

Throughout my life, I've never really thought to use writing as a tool for asking questions, and expressing my wonderments. But in the process of working through this essay, I've found
writing to be a tool that can sometimes even help that writer to better understand something. Because I actually didn’t really know what it was about hearing my Dad’s story that bugged me enough to write about it. But in working through it, and writing some things down, I began to realize that I was actually bugged by a wonderment about the total truthfulness of my Dad’s account of the accident.

So in formulating this essay, I’ve come to see writing quite differently than, for example, the writer of “An Itch Scratched” sees it. She says that for her, "writing is an escape." She describes how, through writing, she relieves the "moaning and groaning" of her previous years. Or, say, the writer of "Tick," who found reading to bring a peace or a cure to her insomnia. For me it's writing, not reading, but I can't say that writing has brought me any form of escape. Writing this brought to mind a whole world of questions that otherwise, I would have left unasked and probably not even thought of. I found writing to uncover many more questions about my experience, and it left me more unsettled than when I began. So for me, writing is a tool for asking questions and discovering questions that originally you didn’t even know existed.

I used to just look at this story as just a sort of strange experience with my Dad. But after writing about it, I now become unsettled when I think about this experience. And the image that continues to return to my mind whenever I think about this experience is that of my Dad looking away, at nothing really, as he told me that he had just passed out from the pain. It was a sort of sideways stare, a break from eye contact, that signaled me in to the fact that maybe there was more that remains untold.