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Flash Nonfiction by Susan Terris



The night my reserved father stood on a chair at a charity banquet to introduce himself after his young grandson had done the same, I wondered if I knew him. He was once a national speed-skating champion, and I spent years wrestling with how a geek like me had a dad like that. He was tall and so skinny that when he married my mom, he weighed less than she did. He wrote short stories and often thought of being a writer, but because of the Great Depression, he was forced to choose a more practical profession.

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Years later, when he died at 71 of mesothelioma, my mother opened his dresser drawers and his closet for us, the children and grandchildren, to take whatever we wanted to remember him. My father loved shoes, briar pipes, handknit sweaters. While my husband chose an Aran sweater, I chose a silver nail file—silver with a hallmark. I'm still not sure why I took that file.

In the same drawer, he had a leather-bound case filled with tweezers, combs, clippers, and a medium grit file. But the file I took was separate and belonged to a man who was just not a silver file kind of guy. So why did he have it?

It was a mystery, but for decades, after polishing, I used it to clean and shape my nails. The unexplained silver file even made its way into a poem of mine. And one night, before an audience of college students, I prefaced reading that poem by saying my father had been a speed-skating champ, and though the poem had a silver nail file in it, I had no idea why he had possessed such an item.

Suddenly, from the audience, a young woman with curly brown hair jumped up, waving her hand wildly. "I was a skater! Can I tell you something? Now?" she asked. I said, "Yes, now."

Turns out, the silver files were good luck totems for skaters. But more importantly, they were used to file tiny burrs off the edges of blades before every competition. Old old mystery solved. The man who once stood on a chair was also the one who took me skating with him every Saturday morning when I was a girl. He was the man who'd dreamed up stories, been sports editor of the *Daily Cardinal* at the University of Wisconsin, who'd graduated in 1929 and had to go into the family real estate biz—the man who encouraged me to write, who kept his good luck silver file for 50-plus years, even when he no longer competed.

My father continued to skate every Saturday morning. He was happy in marriage, loved his wife and children, yet loathed his profession and was also the man when my first book was published who said, "They pay you for this! Ring-a-ding-ding!" as he handed me a brimming glass of champagne.



Art Information

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Susan Terris' recent books are *Familiar Tense* (Marsh Hawk, 2019); *Take Two: Film Studies* (Omnidawn, 2017); *Memos* (Omnidawn, 2015); and *Ghost of Yesterday: New and Selected Poems* (Marsh

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Hawk, 2012). She's the author of seven books of poetry, seventeen chapbooks, three artist's books, and two plays. A poem of hers appeared in *Pushcart Prize XXXI*. A poem from *Memos* was in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Her newest book is *Dream Fragments*, which won the 2019 Swan Scythe Press Award. Terris is editor emerita of *Spillway Magazine* and a poetry editor at *Pedestal*.

For more information, see [Susan Terris's website](#) [7].

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