

NICK OTTE

A THING ON DAD

It started as a little lump halfway between dad's elbow and the sharp, freckled angle of his shoulder. Hardly a thing you'd notice. Even if you knew that arm like we did, you'd have to get in close, run your hands over his skin to be certain anything was there at all. Our family didn't go in for that sort of touchy-feely stuff. We preferred to convey our affection in handshakes, nods, storebought cards with prewritten surrogate verses.

By and by the lump protruded. Sort of bubbled out until we couldn't *not* notice. I used to picture an atom-sized hobgoblin, pressing down on an equally miniscule tire pump somewhere deep beneath dad's gradually ballooning skin. He started cutting one sleeve off of all his dress shirts. I collected the extra cloth with plans to make a hammock for the yard or a rope to dangle out my window for a quick escape, but they just ended up in a pile in my closet, knotted like the orphaned skins of snakes.

Over the years it became all too easy to compare the lump to citrus. Clementine. Meyer lemon. Tangerine. By the time I left home, it was well on its way to grapefruit.



I met Clay, we fell in love, and bought a house states away to start a family of our own. We agreed that we would do things differently, now it was our turn. We would write long-hand letters, give gifts of our own haphazard making, never shut the lights without a patient embrace. We remembered these declarations even when we failed to live up to them. Especially then.



Last summer mom and dad came to visit us, to meet their new grand-