

## Why I Wrote *My Father's Guitar & Other Imaginary Things*

An Essay by Joseph Skibell

In the wake of my father's death, I became a little obsessed with guitars, and in the summer of 2009, I took my daughter Samantha on a road trip across North America, visiting master guitar-builders. It's too long a tale to tell here—you can read about it in the title story of my new book—but I was searching for my father's imaginary guitar. I was forty-nine, and for the first time in my life I'd begun to feel old. Sami was eighteen, newly graduated from high school, and the trip became a kind of rolling meditation on family, mortality, and the end of childhood. The image of us in our rental car said it all, I thought: my daughter in the passenger seat, looking forward into the future, while I, driving, looked forward, too, but also back through the rearview mirror, at the long road, at the life behind us, my father—I've no doubt—joining us from time to time in the backseat. I kept notes along the way, and many of the stories in *My Father's Guitar & Other Imaginary Things* come from those notes.

At the same time, my concerns as a writer were evolving. After working for five years on *A Curable Romantic*, an epic novel with a cast of hundreds, I felt pulled toward its exact opposite: a suite of shorter, more intimate stories, chamber pieces really, drawn not from the great epochs of history but from the hours of my own life.

Nonfiction wasn't such a stretch. Stories are stories, and in any case, the line between fiction and nonfiction has always been porous for me. The protagonist of my first book, *A Blessing on the Moon*, is a fictional version of my great-grandfather, Chaim Skibelski. Charles Belski, the main character of my second novel, *The English Disease*, is a funhouse-mirror version of me. Historical figures crowd the pages of *A Curable Romantic*.

Still, I was excited by this exploration of real—as opposed to imaginary—life. As a writer, I feel about life the way the people of the Great Plains felt about the buffalo: I want to use every part of it. Too much of a writer’s experience falls through the cracks. It seems like such a waste to me, and I decided that rather than assigning events from my own life, whenever I could, to imaginary characters, I’d write the stories straight out, exactly as they happened.

In doing this, I discovered something curious: though these stories are all true, they’re filled—as our lives are filled—with imaginary things. “Get Your Feet Back on the Ground,” for instance, is about an earworm, one of those tunes that keeps going around in your head. In the title story, I’m convinced I remember a guitar that doesn’t quite exist. In “Ten Faces,” someone tries to sell me a portrait with an imaginary provenance, claiming it was painted by a half-mad WWII resistance fighter named Skibell. In “Irvin in Wonderland,” my father, hallucinating during a hospital stay, has a series of profound, though completely imaginary, encounters. And though I thought I’d left ghosts behind in *A Blessing on the Moon* and *A Curable Romantic*, there’s even a ghost in the story “*Snip Snip Snip*,” the ghost of a suicide haunting the house my wife Barbara lived in when I first met her. (A haunted house is not, it turns out, an unusual occurrence in Taos.)

The people in my life—Barbara, Sami, my father, uncles, cousins, aunts—appear and reappear in this suite of sixteen true stories. To me, it feels like looking into a large house through sixteen small windows, and part of what you glimpse through each of those windows is the long, intergenerational tension running through my family, between its dreamy *luftmenschen*, its ne’er-do-wells, and its practical businessmen, a tension that resonates most strongly between my mercantile father and me, his dreamy, artistic son.

By the end of the trip Sami and I made together, I realized it's not only the occasional guitar that's imaginary. We're all more or less imaginary beings, "such stuff as dreams are made on," as Shakespeare reminds us, "our little life rounded by a sleep." At the end of that little life, the only thing we leave behind us, really, is a story.

And though the "plots" of the stories in *My Father's Guitar & Other Imaginary Things* are small, I hope that their themes—family, mortality, the end of childhood among them—resonate in a large way. After all, that's how it is in our lives, isn't it? Though the fleeting hours of our days are filled with small events, the meaning of those hours is large, mythic, profound—epic, in fact.