

Confabulating

by Jane Frances Hacking

“I have news,” our father said and gestured for the three of us to gather round. He’d agreed to be transferred to his wheelchair and so instead of standing around his bed, we perched on the assortment of uncomfortable chairs that populate his retirement home living room.

“I’m engaged to Rachel.”

“To me?” my sister Rachel asked.

“No, no. Rachel Evans.”

It was possible to trace this marital development back to earlier in the day when he’d reminisced about this girlfriend from the distant past. We, of course, had never known her since she predated our mother. We did know that she was somehow related to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, and that our grandmother could never quite forgive him for not walking down the aisle with her. We played along.

“When?” Daniel asked.

“Two Wednesdays after Easter.” Oddly precise.

“Where?”

“Canterbury Cathedral. The archbishop will marry us, I’ve had an email from him.”

He radiated happiness and declared, “We should have a toast. Champagne, I think.” Daniel was dispatched to the liquor store.

But of course, he isn’t getting married. He is confabulating. *Confabulation*. Another term added to the arsenal of aging associated vocabulary we are getting used to. I’ve been reading up on it. It can co-occur with dementia but doesn’t have to. Our father is sharp as a tack, except when he’s confabulating. Sometimes people call it “honest lying” to capture the fact that the confabulator’s creation of false memories carries no intent to deceive. I like that term.

He's been confabulating for a while now.

"I'm headed north." His voice was clear down the phone line. Here we go, I think. He rarely telephones and increasingly when he does, it is to tell one of his children an honest lie.

"They think they have power over me, but I am walking out of here." Given that he hasn't left his bed for weeks, this seems unlikely, but why be churlish.

"Where are you going?"

"Kearney. Do you know it?" I did not but knew this lapse in my geographical knowledge would soon be corrected.

"Well," he continued. "In the days when you bought match books, they were all made in Kearney. I've bought the factory for a small sum. Disused now. And the house that goes with it. The house needs a lot of work."

"That's probably good," I said. "It'll be a project for you when you get there. Something to do."

Later I googled Kearney, which does exist although there does not seem ever to have been a match factory there. His confabulations often involve Northern Ontario.

"It may look to you like I am doing nothing," he announced from his bed the first time I'd been able to visit since the start of the pandemic. He was indeed doing nothing, but I didn't say this. Just made a non-committal noise and waited to see what he'd say next. "I'm writing a series of detective novels."

"In your head?"

"Well, I think them up in my head, but I have to write them out for my editor." I could tell by his tone he thought I was the crazy one, which wasn't really fair, because he hasn't held a pen for years.

"What are they about?"

"I've got a detective chap who goes from town to town up north and in each town, he has to solve a crime. My editor is extremely pleased. The first one's been selling very well so they want more. A whole series."

What do you say to that? I went with: What's it called? The one that's out and selling well? He didn't miss a beat. *The Spyglass of the North*.

Great title. There should be a book called that. Later when I recounted this to my siblings, Rachel asked if I'd googled it. "Maybe he has actually written it."

There are two kinds of confabulation: provoked and spontaneous. Provoked confabulations are when someone makes something up in response to a question they can't answer. Spontaneous confabulations are less common, have no obvious motivation, and are "more fantastic and grandiose in nature." They can be the result of long-term alcoholism. Our father opts for the fantastic, grandiose, and rarer form of the condition. It's been going on for quite some time. Although not as long as his drinking.

It feels unseemly, almost voyeuristic, to see him this way. His confabulations are chinks in his armour. Each one reveals a psychological preoccupation, an unmet need, an emotional vulnerability. Clinicians speculate that confabulation helps people make sense of themselves, feel relevant. Our catastrophically widowed father, who can no longer walk and whose last book was published in 2014, is setting things to right. He's got wedding plans, a revived writing career, and he's walking north to remodel an old match factory.

"Do you try to tell him what he's saying isn't true?" a friend asked. I don't. None of us do. We step onto the stage of his imagination and back into our childhood roles.

When we were little, his enthusiasms had purchase in the real world. "Faster, daddy, faster!" we shrieked as elephants charged after our Peugeot in Uganda. "Shall we walk to the ocean from our backdoor?" he wondered when we were teenagers. And we did. Toasting his engagement or enquiring about the conditions of the disused match factory perpetuates a lifelong arrangement. He needs us. To play along. As he always has. Our larger-than-life father conducts an orchestra with three musicians.



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