NAMING MY FATHER

My father could look at a loose metal bolt and say if it was a three-eighths or a five-sixteenths, but he could not name his four daughters unless we were lined up by height. He taught my sisters and me to eat corn on the cob left to right, two even rows at a time, like little typewriters. He walked without bobbing his head up and down, as though it were tied to an overhead cable. When my mother asked my father if he remembered her friend Marjorie, he asked, "The one with symmetrical moles?"

When I was young, I did not know my father was unusual: Our parents show us how people are supposed to be. By the time my sisters and I started to name the things that made our father different, we were grown, and he was gone.

In the 1940s, gator farms in Louisiana shipped live baby alligators through the mail, a dollar and a half for an eight-inch specimen. My grandparents had one shipped to Los Angeles and gave it to my father for his tenth birthday. He named it Al.

"That alligator was your daddy's best friend," said my grandma Leela.

Baby alligators walk with their heads raised up, high-stepping their feet and slapping them flat on the ground. In a black-and-white photo, my ten-year-old father wears his hair slicked back. He is crawling behind Al, both of them with heads held high and legs raised up for the next step.

"He would follow that alligator around for hours," Grandma Leela said. "I don't know why he didn't play with other children."

In 1944, the same year my father got his baby alligator, Dr. Hans Asperger presented a paper in Vienna about a personality difference he called autism. Asperger described his young patients as "socially unconcerned." He noted their extreme reactions if something unexpected happened, but he also described their fascinations with negative numbers, poetry, and spaceships. He said one boy had "rich experiences and his own independent interests . . . one could really learn from him."

People with autism, Asperger wrote, "can fulfill their social role within the community, especially if they find understanding, love and guidance." His paper was written in German and would not be read by American doctors for almost forty years.

The year before Asperger's paper was published, Dr. Leo Kanner at Johns Hopkins had published his own paper about autism. He said the children he studied valued people the way they did "the desk, the bookshelf, or the filing cabinet." They were obsessed with "the maintenance of sameness."

Because he published his paper before Asperger, and in English, Kanner became known in the United States as the father of autism, and his views about autistic children molded American medical practice. Desperate parents took pilgrimages to his clinic and laid their hopes on his desk.

"In the whole group, there are very few really warmhearted

fathers and mothers," Kanner wrote. He coined the term "refrigerator mother."

Believing parents were to blame for autism, Kanner supported parentectomies: sending children with autism to institutions and forbidding visits from their families. He believed the treatment would be infrequent because autism was rare: By the end of his decades-long career, Kanner reported he had seen only 150 cases.

My father graduated from high school in the early 1950s, at the start of the Korean War, and was drafted into the Army. He walked with flat feet, so the Army made him a typist.

Twenty years later, in a dinner-table monologue directed at my sisters and me, our father described having to type with no errors.

"If you made a mistake on a form, even if it was the very last letter of the very last word, you had to type it again," he said. He was smiling.

We sat beneath the world map tacked to the wall, the one he quizzed us on when he wasn't giving a lecture. Not just the continents, countries, and capitals. He quizzed us on the colors, too. "Name the purple countries."

But that night, he lectured about military rules: how to clean a rifle, how to shine your shoes. While my mother and sisters focused on their plates, I mixed my broccoli with potatoes to soften the bitterness and watched my father's shoulders relax while he reminisced about the Army's bounty of rules.

A few years later, I found two shoeboxes in the garage and carried them into the house. They were filled with index cards. My mother and I opened the first box and found cards full of information about military vehicles and weaponry.

"I haven't seen these in years," she said. "Your father typed them while he was in the Army."

Each card listed a piece of equipment, followed by lines of description and a row of reference numbers typed across the bottom. My father had devised a system that let him sort equipment by the manufacturer, the date it was first used by the Army, and a dozen other categories.

In the late 1950s, the G.I. Bill sent my father first to college, where he discovered accounting, and then to grad school to become a C.P.A. He took a job in San Diego and joined a church with a large singles group.

No longer cataloging military equipment for fun, he started typing Bible verses onto index cards; that's what was in the second shoebox. These, too, had a reference system—lines of numbers and letters across the bottom of each card. My father listed each verse's sentence type: question, exclamation, command. He cross-referenced hundreds of topics. He noted the speakers. (G. meant God.)

Meanwhile, the American medical establishment continued to follow Leo Kanner's lead, viewing autism as a behavior issue to be controlled. In addition to parentectomies, over the next few decades, therapists began prescribing tranquilizers, like Thorazine, and hallucinogens, like LSD. Teachers tied children to chairs, slapped their hands, forced them to smell repugnant odors, and withheld food. Shock therapy was common; teachers, parents, and therapists attached electrodes to children's skin and gave them painful zaps if they did something the adult did not like. If they flapped their hands: zap. If they didn't look the teacher in the eye: zap.

My parents met in the church singles group in San Diego and married a few months later.

"I was a spinster," my mother explained. She was twenty-six.

She had four babies in six years, in between packing and moving and setting up a new home each time my father left another less-than-perfect job. By the time I was ten, we had moved a dozen times, up and down the state of California.

While our father was at work, my sisters and I were free to play loud games and be rambunctious. At one house, we climbed lemon trees; at another, we made a giant mudhole. Our mother enjoyed our wildness and emotion, until it got to be too much, and then she swatted us.

I don't know if my mother recognized her husband's behavior as odd. She must have known that noise and movement set him off, yet in the evening when we heard his footsteps clomping up the pathway to our house, I sometimes saw her walk over to the stereo and turn the volume up.

My mother did not talk about our father's differences. She seemed as unenlightened as her daughters about how fathers should behave: From the age of seven, she had lived year-round at a boarding school and saw her parents for only two weeks every summer. Still, it would have helped my sisters and me if she had named our father's strangeness and interpreted his actions.

It is easy to blame the mother.

By the time I was in kindergarten, I knew that if I were quiet and made no sudden movements, I could be my father's little helper. When he made ice cream one summer afternoon, he let me hold the ruler inside the wooden bucket while he added the layers of rock salt and crushed ice. He patted each layer flat, then measured it. An ice layer, he insisted, had to be exactly half an inch.

"Don't breathe on the ice," he told me, even though it was already melting from the rock salt and the sunny California day. I turned my head away, careful to hold the ruler straight.