

THREE DAYS

I am a clay man, and if I'm lucky, I will live to see one more day. You see, the average life expectancy of a clay man is three days, give or take a few hours. I realize this amount of time may sound short to you. Sometimes it sounds short to me too, but other times it feels about right. There are so many things to worry about in this world, and anything can happen. For instance, the boy could forget to sponge me today. Naturally, without the wet sponge, my outer layers would harden and my body would begin to break apart. Believe me, it's not pretty. Yesterday that very thing happened to my mother. We sat by helplessly and watched her dry up and crumble into a mess on the shelf. Why the boy forgot to sponge her, I don't know. Anyone could see she had deep cracks everywhere. But who can predict what the boy will do from one minute to the next?

After my mother was gone, my father became depressed. His head hung down really low, as if the weight of it was too much for his neck to support. This morning the boy picked him up and gave him a good rub with the sponge, and then he added more clay to my father's neck and straightened it out for him. I was so relieved. I praised the boy all morning. It's amazing what a little cold slip behind the neck will do for a clay man. A clay man with a sound neck can sometimes live a full three days. It's hard to believe that my own grandfather lived three days and four hours. This just doesn't happen that often. "Nobody loved being a clay man more than your grandfather," my mother used to tell me. "Three days wasn't enough for him. He had to go for four."

With my father's neck fixed, I thought that maybe now he would have a good shot at surpassing my grandfather. He was still depressed, but he looked *fantastic*. The boy had smoothed over his cracks, and the added clay on his neck made him look even stronger. However, as I said before, there are so many things to worry about in this world, and anything can happen. After lunch the boy returned to have a look at us, and that's when he found a small crack at the peak of my father's head.

The boy immediately carried him to the sink and turned on the faucet. I was confused because I didn't see the sponge anywhere. Where was the sponge? The boy wet one of his fingers, then proceeded to rub my father's head quite delicately, trying his best to erase the thin, crooked line. The procedure was taking a long time — too long for such a minor fracture. "Come on you clumsy boy!" I wanted to shout. "Forget about his stupid head and bring him back home!" But the boy kept working on him, as if making my father perfect was all that mattered. More and more water was added, and eventually my father became so wet his features began to blur and melt away, until finally he was unrecognizable. The boy balled up the wet blob that was my father in his fist and tossed him in the garbage. A few minutes later he found the sponge, and he held me in his palm and gave me a fresh rub down. Then, looking pleased with himself, he set me back down on the shelf.

It isn't easy watching those you love pass on. Yet there's something oddly wonderful about it too. Clay men and women are known for going quietly, and I guess I see a great dignity in that, though I doubt I'd feel any less proud of one who went kicking and screaming. Right now the boy is working hard on some new clay men. Soon he will place them next to me, and they will become my children. I have no choice now but to sit here and pray that they come out good and thick. If the boy is feeling kind, he will also make a woman for me to spend the rest of my time with. You see, the boy is not purposely cruel. He has seen the empty spaces on both sides of me, and I'm fairly sure he will use his power to fill them.