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LONG ISLAND BOOKS

By Lou Ann Walker

The lush, buttery, lemon-yellow sweater on the dust jacket of Philip Galanes's debut novel, "Father's Day," would lead us to believe that this is a story of preppies and tennis—an uber-WASP "Goodbye, Columbus."

Then again that sweater could clothe a 21st-century Gatsby. It could be slung over the shoulders of John Updike's Rabbit or hung on the back of a Cheever wingback chair. But this particular sweater serves a very different type of master and has a far more important role than just wardrobe stand-in.

Although it may not be readily apparent, this tale of a gay man trolling for love on a New York phone sex service, the Pump Line, actually has a great deal in common with the aforementioned books.

"Father's Day" is a study in longing. The character Matthew Vaber is trying to understand how the people closest to him can betray him through their speech or their unwillingness to speak.

He reviews his own accountability as a traitor. And despite the belief that he has caused and understands the major events of his life, he actually wields very little control over his destiny, which is to be a seeker of love, in many forms.

Mr. Galanes has grasped the publishing shibboleth exceedingly well: Grab them by the collar...or, in this case, the cable-knit sweater.

It wasn't so long after my father killed himself that Sheila Gray came to town and told me quite a story.

Wait.

Let me try that again.

And this time I need you to pay attention to Sheila and the story she told me about my mother. That's what I wanted you to hear. The part about my father was just for chronology, but it felt like more than that, didn't it? It made more noise than that....

Gently, intelligently, with surprising good humor, Matthew Vaber reviews the major events of the family's life before the father shot himself dead. Only there's none of that tedious "Why me? Why him? Why us?"

In fact there's nothing so ham-handed as trying to figure out why at all. Matthew is just lunging after love on the Pump Line and in rough-and-tumble bathhouses, skipping shrink appointments and gritting his teeth as he goes to visit his difficult mother on the weekends, all the while trying to convince her to host a memorial service that she doesn't want.

She's so hard, my mother, and so soft.

Think of a chocolate-covered cherry, except instead of chocolate, think steel. A fortified steel-covered cherry, and just when you're convinced that its shell is impenetrable, that it could never break

in a million years, it does. When she's whole, she steamrolls right over you, just flattens you out, but when she's broken, there's nothing but viscous red syrup spilling everywhere and seeping right into you.

Each of Vaber's flashbacks is an examination of childhood shame or confusion, often told to crisp effect by Mr. Galanes's technique of one-sentence paragraphs, each of which delivers a precision cut. Take this tennis practice of Matthew with his father:

Now a backhand.

It would be so much easier to know for sure if he'd say something.

A backhand volley, then another.

I'm afraid of him.

Run for a lob.

Lob it back.

The gentlest man you can imagine, and still I'm afraid of him.

Find that ready position.

Does he know how I conspire against him?

Turn my body for a deep backhand.

He must.

Get my racquet back.

How I egg my mother on?

Hit the ball into the net.

He couldn't. No, he couldn't know, and still do this.

A deep lob, then an easy forehand.

What would he do if he found out?

When he hits a short ball, I run for the net.

"Dig, dig, dig," he says softly.

I think he wants me to make it in time, before the ball bounces twice. I'm almost positive he does, but I never let myself know for sure. I'm careful not to let myself grow too fond of him either.

"Nice job."

My mother doesn't brook disloyalty.

Matthew's analysis of childhood behavior is counterbalanced by his slash-and-burn Technique when he calls the Pump Line, hanging up on this prospect, mercilessly cut off by another. But somehow he's a hapless naïf in these sex games.

One man he finally agrees to admit to his apartment arrives, a foot shorter than promised and with plucked eyebrows. In the Downtown Club bathhouse, Matthew is pummeled by another guy. Then Matthew meets T.L., Mr. True Love, Henry. Or so it might seem.

Matthew, a photography dealer, is furious when Henry shows up at the gallery, barging in on a near double sale with one of Matthew's best clients, a collector named Constance who skitters off when she sees a grungily dressed Henry popping in to speak with Matthew: " 'Henry,' I say, when she's safely gone, not at all surprised by the hardness in my voice. 'You just cost me ten thousand dollars.'"

Henry parries Matthew's anger. Henry had phoned. He'd been locked out of his apartment all day because Matthew had taken both sets of keys when they left the building that morning.

It's the willingness to show a character who throws himself into his enormous mistakes that in part makes Matthew so compelling. He becomes convinced he's solved the mystery of his mother's sexuality and knows the people with whom she slept. He feels certain he's parsed his father's life correctly. And what he learns is that he doesn't know near as much as he thinks he does about anyone.

But back to that sweater, which throws the plot into the spin cycle. Somehow Vaber, a lousy teenage driver, was mistakenly issued a driving permit without taking the road exam. His parent forbade him from driving on the highway. And then one day he feels compelled to shop at a store 45 minutes away and buy a yellow cable-knit sweater. He must.

On his return he smashes the garage. His father is understanding about the gash, but then his mother brings in the piece de resistance: the store receipt, dated that day, for the Shetland sweater. And Matthew, despite hours of interrogation, never breaks down, never backs away from his story that he didn't drive to that store, that he didn't take the car out on the highway.

"I defy them all—a lying Joan of Arc," Mathew admits. That evening Matthew is watching Johnny Carson on the "Tonight" show. His father sits down next to him on the sofa, throws an arm around him, and tells his son he loves him.

"The next day it was if the whole thing never happened. I never heard another word about that trip to Northampton—not from him or from her. And you know, I could never bring myself to wear that lovely lemony sweater. Not even once. I can't imagine trousers that would go with a sweater like that."

"Father's Day" is a novel of tenderness and longing, hope and helplessness. It's about the lemony sweaters we're all hiding.

Lou Ann Walker has previously contributed to The Star.