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FIRST FICTION

Father's Day

Philip Galanes

Alfred A. Knopf: 218 pp., \$22.95

In *Matthew Vaber*, Philip Galanes has created a narrator precariously poised somewhere between hero and antihero. Insecure, self-obsessed, superficial and cranky, Matthew spends every waking hour dialing 555-PUMP, looking for a connection, however fleeting, among a rogues' gallery of potential sexual or emotional saviors. "I never include genitalia," he tells us of his conversations, anxious that we don't get the wrong impression. He's after a more rarified kind of tawdry: "Does he like Muriel Spark, for instance; does he play backgammon; does he have a boyfriend already?" When Matthew makes haste to a downtown sex club, it's no surprise that he spends an inordinate amount of time folding his clothes into neat piles and comparing the claustrophobic buddy booths to the fitting rooms at Bergdorf Goodman.

Matthew is clearly coping with some issues. His exertions on the Pump Line might have something to do with the recent suicide of his father, a shadowy figure recalled in flashbacks: tennis and driving lessons, the agony of Little League. As Matthew zeroes in on Harry, a child psychiatrist dreamboat he meets on his favorite phone line, he plans a memorial with his aloof, imperious mother who, to Matthew's delight, might actually be a lesbian. The proposed memorial steadily downgrades into a cocktail party, while Matthew scrambles to get a handle on his parents (who were these people?), himself (why do I keep calling this number?) and Harry (is he too perfect for me?).

"Father's Day" might be more psychologically pat than probing, but line by tart line, Galanes gives us a curious even brave thing: a novel at once comic and heartbreaking, brutally frank and willfully obscure, in which a guy's appetite for escapist, anonymous sex just might deliver him toward self-realization.