

Dismemberment

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My childhood memory album is filled with pictures of severed arms. There are many black and white photographs of me as an infant being cradled by a pair of arms that are unattached from their owner's body. There are pictures of these disembodied arms holding me in the pool, at the zoo, and carrying me into the small brick house we called home on the Marine's military base in Santa Ana, California. For a while, every memory I had of my father brought to mind the image of his severed arms: arms that had been violently ripped from his body in a moment of anger.

When my father was killed in Vietnam in 1967, my mother reacted in anger, furious at being abandoned and left alone with three young children. I believe she was angry at the unfinished business of their lives, the future that once was so carefully planned now hanging in shreds like laundry left out in a violent storm. The potential of their lives gone in one instant, left with nothing but fear and anger at the incompleteness of their life together. In her anger, she sat in the living room in front of an intense roaring fire and stared at her favorite photographs. Then, in deliberate motions of rage, she carefully tore his image from every picture she had, leaving only his arms. There was a controlled fury to this motion, for she knew she couldn't totally destroy the pictures. Destruction would erase our existence, while this mutilation only altered it.

I came to know these arms well, and would dream often of his body crying out for his lost appendages. Bits and pieces of his body were all that were returned to my mother, and bits and pieces summed up the heritage she left for us. I remember several weeks after his death when I couldn't find a picture that he had sent me of himself in uniform. I was frantic and when I finally found it, ran into my mother's bedroom to show her. I recall her form as she was bending over pulling her pantyhose up over her knees, and I recall her shocked expression when I burst into

the room with this picture. She dropped the nylons and screamed at me. “Don’t ever show that picture to me again!” I stood and stared at her as only a 7-year-old can when disbelief turns to great pain.

For years, these violently altered photographs shaped my image of death. Death was a secret shame, a dark shadow that acted as a veil over my life. It was a non-issue, its very silence a scream for a question, a cry for my attention. It would be years before I could summon the courage to look death in the eye, an eternity before my questions would be answered; and, while time slipped by, my memories faded and became like an old well-used mirror: a mirror where the silver has tarnished and faded, leaving a hazy image gazing back at you from its worn reflection with the doubt that what you’re seeing is an accurate reflection of what you are.

I sit in front of a fire now, much like that day long ago when my mother did the same. I gaze at the photographs that remain and try to summon any memory. As the eldest daughter, I am the only one with any memories of my father; yet these memories I question.

I recall a warm, sunny morning when my daddy was whistling in the kitchen, drinking his coffee, and had decided it was a perfect day for a bike ride. He perched me in the child seat attached to the handlebars, and off we rode. I remember the fleeting terror of trying to keep my feet out of the spokes and his laughter when we finally reached the park and he swung me around like an airplane. I remember the way he always teased us by rubbing his two-day beard stubble on our soft cheeks, tickling us and making us all laugh. Yet these photos seem to defy my memories, showing instead just hands on the handlebars and arms unattached, the sockets of the shoulders quiet with their secret shame. What is real? I know he existed, because I exist, and I remember his existence; yet these photos beg to tell a different story.

It’s interesting when our brains recall a memory that seems to be a certainty, yet others when they hear our recollection laugh and say that this was not how it was at all. I have a very clear memory of my daddy teaching me to tie my shoes. I recall

his patience, his hands covering mine as he demonstrated the intricacies of handling the laces. I remember writing this story for a class in high school; and, when my teacher told my mom about my story, my mom commented later that it was not my dad who taught me how to tie my shoes but my uncle. An uncle I don't even like much. So I continue to hold onto my memory, preferring this to her recollection.

My dad loved to restore and work on old cars. The smell of gasoline returns me to the dark musty garage where he worked on the family vehicles. I remember always going out to the garage with him when he was home and just sitting on a stool quietly watching him. He always whistled or sang to the music playing on the old worn transistor radio while tinkering under the hoods of various vehicles. He also loved to work with wood, and his concentration while carefully and gently sanding an old piece of furniture was complete and total. I have a chair that he refinished, and the scent of a certain furniture polish takes me back to that garage. I was always sad when he was home. I was sad because I knew it was just a matter of time before he left again. Life in the military meant that his leaving again was an absolute; it was just a matter of when. I couldn't understand my mother's anger at his death because of this absolute. Wasn't death always a possibility, given the war he fought in?

I remember 1973. My mother had remarried, but this did not mean much to me. I still waited for my dad to come home and envisioned his rousting this stranger from our midst. I recall lying on a worn golden shag carpet in front of the television while NBC showed images of military planes returning POWs to U.S. soil. I remember watching the face of every serviceman very carefully, looking for the one who was my dad to walk off the airplane and wave. I did not find him, and my mom did not understand my sorrow, for she had no comprehension of what I sought or why I sought it.

So arms and hands are all I have of the pictures she passed on to me; and for years, that was all I had. She had effectively erased every trace of my daddy from my life.

When my daddy's mom died several years ago, she left me several boxes. I was suddenly the recipient of a gift more precious than money, than gold, than any thing she could possibly have given me. She left me memories, and she returned my daddy to me.

In these boxes were hundreds of photographs that spanned my father's short life. I sat among the piles I had made of these photos and cried. Tears made it difficult to see the pictures I had waited a lifetime to discover, always knowing that someone had to have some evidence of him but never daring to breach that wall of silence to ask. Now I had proof of his existence.

I saw for the first time the boy my father had been: tousled hair, torn denim jeans, a mischievous grin on his face. This was the grin that so many aunts and uncles had spoken of, and now I saw it for the first time in black and white. I discovered the origin of the nose I hated so much on myself; and it eased the pain, as I felt pride for the first time, realizing that I had my father's nose. I saw his graduation, my parents' courtship, and even the car he lovingly restored and drove on their honeymoon.

The greatest treasure was a bundle of letters wrapped with twine that I found near the bottom of one well-worn box. My grandma had saved his letters that he had written while stationed in Vietnam, and I sat with a glass of wine in my hand and read them. There is something so profoundly personal and touching when you read the words written by someone you loved greatly so long ago. I glimpsed his soul. Day to day activities written of take on new significance when you realize that he died two weeks and three days later. He talked of his fear, riding in the helicopters doing the medic evacuations, and the times they were shot at by the enemy. He spoke of wanting out so desperately so he could return to his family and just be a daddy and a husband. His last letter speaks of his plans to take my mother on a surprise late honeymoon trip to Hawaii with money he had secretly stashed away. My tears slid down my cheeks silently as I read these letters and tried to imagine the man my father was. I wonder if I am like him at all. I now know that we look alike, and this pleases me. It pleases me in the way that the ugly duckling was pleased

with his new reflection. I felt that I had discovered my origins and the explanation for why I wasn't beautiful like my mother, why my nose differed from her perfect profile, why my eyes squint when I laugh. I belonged.

There were so many treasures in these boxes. Old medals, uniforms, training manuals, even shoe polish. I continued sorting through these memories and pieces of my father. In the bottom of one of the boxes was a flag, folded in a formal triangle. A veiled memory tugged at my heart. I remember when this flag was handed to my mother after his formal military funeral, after it was solemnly lifted off his casket and given a final somber folding before the handing off of the flag to the widow.

I held this flag in my hands for an eternity as old records played in my memories and voices of others whispered to my soul. I unfolded the flag and wrapped it around me, holding dear to the blood red and white stripes.