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What We Find in the Sea

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Abstract

Personal essay in which the author recounts his struggle to come to terms with his lack of grief over his grandfather's death.

Keywords

Personal essay, what we find in the sea, creative writing

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Nonfiction

Comments

Honorable mention in the 2013 Virginia Woolf Essay Prize, judged by Jon Pineda.

What We Find in the Sea

David King

My paternal grandfather's name was Hal, and for as long as I could remember he'd lived in Florida, in one of those planned and gated developments whose name I never bothered to remember. All the houses there were lined up side by side in neat rows along the street. They all looked alike and were built in an architectural style that seemed vaguely influenced by traditional Spanish designs. Looking back now I can just imagine the developer's pitch to investors: "It combines the history and culture of Florida's Spanish settlers with the comfort and familiarity of William Levitt's suburbia, perfect for retiring baby boomers."

I may not have cared much for the buildings, but I was crazy about the location. If you walked down the street far enough you'd find yourself on a dock that overlooked an estuary that connected to the ocean. My dad and I would often walk down there after dinner when the temperature started to go down. We would look at the plants and wildlife, one time we were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a manatee. The ocean was just a quick drive away, and I have many fond memories of me and my sister swimming in the ocean, running across the sand, and building sandcastles on the beach, all while trying in vain to convince our mom to get in the water (she always insisted it was too cold). As I look back though, I realize that one person is noticeably missing from my memories, my grandpa.

I never knew much about my grandpa, only that he was a veteran of either World War II or Korea, and that he worked at the college in town. I only saw him for a week or so once a year, but even when I was around him, I never made much effort to get to know him. What stands out most in my mind is his skin; it was rough, like leather, and his voice, which was strained and gravelly. In short, he was old, and very intimidating. So intimidating that I was unsure of how to act around him, so I distanced myself from him. Then one day when I was ten my dad called my sister and I to the living room where he told us that Grandpa Hal had died. I was surprised at

first, I knew he was in the hospital, he had fallen a few days earlier and had required surgery. I had just made him a get well present a few days ago. People don't die from a simple fall, that's absurd, the doctors were taking care of him and everyone said he was getting better. When I pointed this out to my dad he just said that they were wrong, they thought he was going to get better, but there were complications. There wasn't much to say after that, while the rest of my family seemed to be in various stages of distress, I retained my composure. Deep down, I knew I should feel much sadder than I did.

I had never experienced the death of a family member before. In fact I hadn't experienced the death of anyone, but despite my inexperience I knew enough to know that I should be crying right now, or doing something, I was far too composed for a kid who had just lost his grandpa. Never the less I found myself in the kitchen, still without shedding a single tear, but then as I went to get something to drink I started to think. I pictured everything that I had lost, the trips to the beach, the sand castles, the dock, his rough leathery skin and strained gravelly voice, they were all gone, and I'd never get to see them again. Then, finally, grief overcame me, and I found myself sobbing with tears running down my cheeks. My head turned to face the ceiling as I wailed out the most clichéd mourning phrase known to man, "Why did he have to die?"

Then it was over, it couldn't have lasted longer than a minute, but it was long enough for my mom to catch me and insist that I watch a movie with her and my sister to take my mind off things. I didn't put up much of a fight, partly because it gave me an excuse to put off doing my homework, but mainly because I couldn't bring myself to admit to her that after my little episode had ended my feelings of indifference had returned. So I watched the movie with them. I remember it was *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*, I remember that so well, yet I struggle to recall anything about the man whose death warranted the screening in the first place.

“Funny, the things you remember and the things you don't.” That’s a line from another movie, *All About Eve*. I can remember that quote, and several others from the same film fairly easily, yet I struggle to remember anything my grandpa ever said to me, or anything I ever said to him. As the days went by I remained unfazed by my grandpa’s death. When my teacher found out about it she took me aside and told me that if I ever needed to be alone for a minute I could go out in the hall; I never needed to go out in the hall. The year before, one of my classmate’s mother died and he ended up missing weeks of school, and then when he finally did return he would often start crying at his desk in the middle of the lesson. I knew that losing a grandpa wasn’t nearly as bad as losing a mom, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that my mini-breakdown in the kitchen was going to be the full extent of my grief.

Having come to terms with this fact I now began to wonder why I didn’t feel anything. Was I a bad person? Was I mean, or heartless? It eventually dawned on me that the reason for my lack of feelings was simple. I didn’t know the man. I barely saw him; he was more of a stranger to me, or just a guest of my dad’s who would come and sleep on the pullout couch in the basement for a couple days every few years, and in return would let us stay at his house when we went to Florida over spring break each year. Society’s rules dictated that I was supposed to be saddened by his death just because my dad happened to be his son, he was family after all. Well he might have been my family on paper, but in real life, as far as I was concerned he was a stranger, no different from all the other strangers around the world who die every second of every day. I don’t mourn them, so why should I mourn him?

For a while my realization made me feel vindicated, I wasn’t mean, or bad, or selfish, I had just seen through an old fashioned ploy to make people feel sad for no good reason. I didn’t tell anyone else about my thoughts; as far as my family was concerned I was just handling my

grief exceptionally well. I didn't want to tell anyone about my thoughts, because I was afraid they wouldn't understand. At least that's what I told myself, but deep down I think I knew the real reason: I didn't want to admit that I didn't know my own Grandpa.

The funeral was held in Florida, but since so many of his friends and family members still lived in the northeast my dad arranged for a memorial service to be held at our church. Several people who knew him would tell stories about him, and I was assigned to read one of his favorite bible quotes, Psalm 23. The service wasn't fancy, mainly just a bunch of people stepping up to a microphone to tell their chosen tales. My grandma talked about their marriage, how they fell in love, and then the arguments they had that led to their separation and him moving to Florida. Then one of his old friends talked about one night my grandpa talked him into sneaking down to the old dump to shoot rats. There were other speakers, but these two stuck out the most for me, because for the first time I began to see my grandpa as a real person. My grandma revealed a different side of him that I had never seen before, and his friend, his story about shooting rats at the dump seemed like something Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn would do, not that old man I vaguely knew down in Florida. As I got up to read the psalm I felt tears welling up in my eyes for the first time in weeks, I held them back though, and began my reading.

“The Lord is my Shepard; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures”
As I read I continued to think about everything I had heard, all the adventures my grandpa had had. All the lives he had touched, for the better and for the worse.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Each story seemed to reveal a different part of him. He had loved and hurt, and been loved and been hurt. He had likes and dislikes just as every other person does.

“You anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over” The Psalm I was reading, I realized, was part of him too. These words had spoken to him, had touched his soul in such a way that he kept them close to his heart. But why?

“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever” I didn’t know, and now it was too late to find out. I finished the reading and returned to my seat, finally letting the tears fall, fully aware that this man wasn’t a stranger, but an interesting human being that I had never bothered to get to know.

After he died, my family went down to Florida again to settle some of his affairs. One evening my dad and I went for a walk along the beach. I took my sandals off and dipped my toes in the water, loving the feeling of the waves sucking the sand out from under my feet while the ocean breeze caressed my face.

“You’re just like your grandfather,” my dad said. “You love the sea.”

I didn’t respond, because I didn’t know what to say.

As the years have passed I’ve learned more about my Grandpa through my parents and grandma. Yet despite what I’ve learned he remains a mystery to me. My dad likes to share his happy memories of growing up, especially his memories of their pets. Apparently my grandpa was an animal lover, a trait he passed down to both his kids. My dad will often talk about the dogs they had as kids. On the other hand my grandma remembers a much more difficult man; while my dad talks about his love of dogs, my grandma recalls how once an ill-mannered stray showed up at their house. My grandma didn’t get along with it, so my grandpa promised he would find another home for it. Instead he decided to keep it, and my grandma locked herself in the bathroom and cried, because she realized that she couldn’t go on living with this man.

They separated before I was born, but only got a divorce a few months before his death, and even then it was only because he had gotten engaged to another woman, a real estate agent who smoked a lot of cigarettes. I can't remember her name. He had very traditional views of marriage. When my dad's older sister was in her twenties she started living with her boyfriend, this was so scandalous to my grandpa that he forced them into a shotgun wedding, which, unsurprisingly, did not last. All this from a man my dad described as "a pretty liberal guy."

Despite all that I've learned about him, I don't think I'll ever really know my grandpa. All the contradictory accounts just seem to confuse my image of him more. He was human, obviously, he made mistakes, and he was flawed, I don't hold what he did to my aunt and grandma against him, it seems silly to hold a grudge against the dead. He died when I was in fifth grade, and now I'm a freshman in college, and still his defining traits to me remain his leathery hands and gravelly voice. Maybe it's best that I leave it that way. Perhaps instead of focusing on the dead, I should try to learn about those who are still alive.