

Casualties of War

My own mother is a fraud, and what eats at me every single night is I don't have the heart to tell my father. My father was a military man, a petty officer in the Navy to be exact. He served our country honorably in the Gulf War, leaving my Mother and me to live among the other naval families near the ship yard in Long Beach. I was seven moving into eight at the time, and with relocation probable after the war, I stayed home for school with my mother as the willing teacher.

Days back then were great. Breakfast consisted of my favorite high sugar cereals, along with a solid rotation of omelets, pancakes, or waffles, and of course eggs and bacon. Afterwards, while my mother watched the news on our miniature, gray, kitchen television and drank her coffee, I would change out of my pajamas into the outfit laid out for me the night before so we could begin my English lesson. At that age, English was my least favorite subject. I wished I had one of those personalized kiddie yearbooks so I could mark it down as such. She thought it would be best to study first while my energy and attention was at its peak for the day. I appreciate it more today of course, but back then I thought I knew it all after breezing through the alphabet and becoming polished in proper sentence structure. She was always sure to remind me of the importance of reading and writing whilst I pouted with agitated eagerness to move along, explaining to me how the ability to master language positively affected my potential success in other areas. To brighten my spirits we transitioned to history. I loved to learn about the wars our country took on, and the brave generals who led our troops. I would imagine my own brave father, and his

heroic acts in battles, hoping one morning I could wake up and see his name or face grace a page in my history book. My mother would shoot me down once I went overboard and lost my concentration though, admitting that although my father was as noble as any, his rank usually did not get recognized among other American heroics transcribed in our history books, but also adding that he was just as important to the cause nonetheless. I took her admission with a grain of salt though, and allowed my imagination to run wild. I would picture him at the helm of his battle ship, navigating the rough waters, as missiles and cannons destroyed all enemy ships in sight. The crew would cheer and rave about my father's exploits and lift him up after another valiant triumph. Once history and my imagination period ended, we moved to science. I appreciated my mother's efforts but even I could tell at the time that it was not her best subject, subsequently preventing it from being mine. We sort of learned together which kept it fun. I still laugh thinking about the time my model volcano erupted all over the breakfast table, and how she shrieked, and pulled her hair in a panic. I remember the kitchen smelling of vinegar and the sound of sticking rubber on the floor when you walked through for a couple of days after. I tried to comfort her at such times of uncertainty and confusion, assuring her that she did a fine job teaching, but lied through my teeth about her lessons being just as good as at the nearby public schools.

Lunch was usually light. We would sit and talk over my crust less ham or bologna sandwiches. If the weather was fair, I would beg her to let me sit outside while I ate, and most the time she would join me. Although she never confessed, I knew she enjoyed the refreshing air as much as I did, the ocean breeze was a sensation I've missed since moving to rural United States. Besides, I didn't have a physical education class and if she

wasn't too tired from the night before we would play a quick game of tag or jump rope until I gave myself a headache. Math was a difficult subject for me to learn, at least in the beginning of each new concept. What made it worse was she forbid the use of calculators. At times I cried of frustration when trying to solve problems in long division, but she always pushed me through and eventually I got pretty good. I aced those mad minute multiplication tables and received perfect scores for many of them. In her estimation, I was a year ahead of most kids my age when it came to math, a thought that always delighted me with how discouraging it could become at times. My mother felt art was as vital a subject as any, but instead of instructing me on how to shade or draw parallel lines, or correctly contrast various colors, she left me to work alone while she took naps on the couch. She emphasized that my artistic expression was mine alone, and how neither she nor anyone could teach me how it was properly done, as long as the work brought its artist peace and joy.

My sole responsibility at the time, a side from cleaning my room, was to wake her up once my self taught art lesson wrapped up so that she could prepare dinner and make phone calls. As I dined alone in the living room, I was allowed a half hour of television viewing. Although she did not like the idea of having one in the home, my father bought it as a parting gift, and she did not want to spoil the small bit of joy he offered me away from his presence. After she finished her calls, she would help prepare my bath, and set out my pajamas for the evening, and also my outfit for the next day's lessons. I would play with my toy naval ships in the tub, splashing the water to mimic harsh typhoons during a stormy night battle until she called me to my room. Once I got settled into bed she would read to me. This act of love was the highlight of my day as I drifted into sleep

land knowing she was still there with me. Usually by this hour she was fully dressed, with a scent of perfume clouding her, while her curly black hair rest below her shoulders. My mother didn't care much for me asking where she went, but her frequent answers centered on bingo night at the naval hall, or some other adult function, including in her answer that grown ups liked to have fun too. I never pressed her too much to avoid making her upset, but to ease my mind she confessed that she was just going to try and make enough money so we could continue my lessons. After my stories, if not constantly checking her watch, we spoke softly about my dad. She choked up when reminiscing about his loving nature and how she couldn't wait for us all to spend more time together. A magic marker hung from the calendar on my bedroom door, we used it to mark the days until his ship was due back to port. She relayed the value of a good night's rest so I could wake up refreshed to continue my lessons and grow up to be smart so that I could make a lot of money for myself, and hopefully support my own family one day. Each night she kissed me on the forehead before quietly shutting my door for the night. As a light sleeper, a burden that's plagued me to this day, I recall waking up on a couple of occasions very late in the night when my body felt heavy like I should be asleep. My mother would sit on the edge of my bed next to me stroking my hair. I could hear her sniffing in the dark, and one time a full on sob ensued. Her back and chest moved up and down and her hands raised up to wipe her eyes dry. Those instances stuck with me, especially when I got a whiff of cigarettes and booze, as neither vice was practiced by my parents as far as I could tell. I kept my eyes closed to appear unconscious until she left my room again, and the feeling of guilt paralyzed me for reasons unexplained fully, just an intrinsic notion that taboo actions were happening on some level or another. On those

telling nights I couldn't go back to sleep, I laid in the darkness while my mind was free to wander and explore potential scenarios. Only now, in hindsight, can I come to certain resolutions, but whatever the answer, will just have to remain inconclusive.