

My Father's Best-Kept Secret

A twelve-year-old boy can stay at home by himself. It should be OK. It didn't happen very often . . . only while my father was at work and my mother did some shopping. The grocery store was barely two blocks away and Mom had done this several times in the past few weeks during our summer vacation, and I knew that I could peer through the porch window and glimpse at the front door to see if anyone tried to enter. If that happened, I had a secret hiding place in the hall closet that no one knew about, and if I kept absolutely quiet and breathed slowly, nobody would know I was there. I had performed this trick on my sister several times and she never found me! After all, it was 1959 and I was growing up.

The large clock in the living room said 10:30 and I figured that my mother would be home in about thirty minutes carrying a bag of groceries. Already I was bored. There was nothing on TV and I didn't have to do homework, so with thirty minutes to kill, I went exploring.

If it were early December, I might go into my parents' room and look under their bed. Two years earlier, I found a box containing a set of Lionel Trains that would be sitting under our tree with my name on them come Christmas morning. There was also a box with a brand new Chatty Cathy doll for my sister. But this was July, and even Santa's elves weren't hiding Christmas presents under beds this early. I decided to confirm those

suspicious and checked anyway. Nothing but dust! So, I ventured into the dining room.

Our dining room was at the geographical center of our house. It occupied the space between our living room and the kitchen. At its center was a large, mahogany table. There were four chairs surrounding it, and when the need arose, we could open up the table and insert a leaf in its center so it could accommodate up to eight people (which was twice as many people as we had family). That leaf was kept behind our china cabinet where my mother stored her “good” dishes, real silverware, and fancy cups. The front was made of wood and glass, and she had some of her larger plates displayed standing upright. Beneath the china closet was a two-door storage area. I remember a time when I opened the bottom compartment and found a scrap book among her keepsakes. It was old and tattered, and some of the pictures fell out as I leafed through the book. I made sure I put each one back in its original place. It was the one my mother put together when she dated my father back in the early 1940s. That day, I decided to unearth that scrap book and look at some of those old pictures and press clippings my mother collected about my dad.

Something at the time told me that I shouldn't be doing this. The cabinet wasn't locked, although there was a brass knob and a key hole just beneath it, but there was an element of invaded privacy that seemed to haunt me. This was my mother's cabinet, and I was looking through her things! Sitting “Indian style” on the floor, I reached carefully through several small boxes, some containing

pictures and others with items like a pair of bronzed baby shoes (either mine or my sister's—I couldn't be sure), a baby's rattle, and an envelope containing our original birth certificates. I discovered that I was born at 4:35 am, a fact that I never knew before, and one that I have remembered ever since. But not everything was my mother's. Upon opening another large but delicate and yellowed envelope, I found my father's high school diploma from Long Island City High School. "Class of 1941" it said. It wasn't framed. It was just placed in an envelope. I wasn't sure if anyone other than my mother and my grandparents had ever seen it. Somehow, I couldn't picture my parents as high school students, but these were real pieces of their early lives that were finding ways to reveal themselves.

I found the scrapbook and began going through some of the familiar pages. Slowly reading the articles, I learned that my father went 4 for 5 with a triple while playing for the Washington Lions, a semi-professional baseball team, while another article mentioned his touchdown while playing "left end" in a Thanksgiving Day football game. I was so engrossed in my impromptu history lesson that I didn't hear the front door open.

Before I knew it, my mother had walked in, placed her groceries on the counter and stood behind me.

"Rob, what are you doing?" she said.

Surprised, and feeling a bit guilty, I replied, "Nothing, mom, I was just reading your scrap book."

Her arms were folded and her eyes felt like they were boring two holes in the back of my head. Slowly, I turned around and said, “Mom, am I in trouble?”

“No, you’re not in trouble, but you should have asked me first. That would have been the right thing to do.”

With that, I apologized, closed the scrap book and attempted to put it back in its original place. As I started to do that, I nudged something that had shifted during my discovery process. It fell to the floor with an uncharacteristic thump. It was a green velvet pouch about six inches long and whatever was inside it had a strange shape and was heavier than expected. The black string that had kept the pouch closed was loose and I could see that some kind of jagged metal was inside. My childhood curiosity got the best of me and I opened the pouch and emptied its contents on the floor. It was a four-inch piece of lead shaped like a mangled lead fishing weight.

“Mom, what is this?”

She gasped, put her hand to her mouth as her eyes went wide and said, “Give me that!”

Before I could react, my mother had swiftly scooped the piece of metal along with the velvet pouch from my hand and said something that sounded like *I can’t believe he kept this!* She hurried out of the living room, went into her bedroom and closed the door. In the stillness that ensued, I could hear her crying.

She emerged after the longest ten minutes of my life. I didn’t know what to do. Should I knock quietly on the door to see if she was OK? No, I should just wait until she came out; and she eventually did. In the meantime, I

carefully placed everything back in the bottom of the china cabinet and waited on the couch.

When she emerged, she was a different person. Gone were the tears . . . and the velvet pouch as well. She also knew she would have to tell me about what had just happened, and she did. We sat down on the couch and she put her arm around me.

“When your father went into the army, he was sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. That was over ten thousand miles away, and we promised that when he came back, we would get married. When he was gone, I went to sleep every night afraid . . . afraid that he wouldn’t come back. Every week I got a letter from him. Sometimes those letters took over a month to get here, and I never knew when he got my letters. That’s just the way things were back then. One afternoon, I saw the mailman coming and ran up to him to see if I had anything from your dad. He held up a letter and I immediately recognized the handwriting on the front of the envelope. He gave it to me and I ran inside to read it. It was a good thing I read it sitting down. There was a part of that letter that scared me:

Today we were in combat and lost two men. I was grazed by a piece of shrapnel and it cut my ear and stuck in the rock behind me. Medics bandaged me up and I’m ok . . . Those words were once written by my father, but that day, they were recalled from a memory that had repeated them over and over for close to twenty years. While I was sure that the letter contained more than those words, they were all my mother felt I needed to know.

A few seconds of silence followed, and I said, “If dad was OK, why were you crying?”

Looking directly at me with her larger-than-life brown eyes, she said, “Because I almost lost him in a place thousands of miles away. That piece of metal you found was the shrapnel that almost killed him. Before he left his bunker, he used his knife to pry it out of the rock. He put it in his pocket and took it home as a souvenir. I don’t know what he was thinking. When he came home, he was unpacking his bag and I noticed it mixed in with his things. When I asked him why he kept it, he couldn’t give me an answer. When he turned his head, I noticed the scar on his left ear. ‘Was that where it grazed you?’ I asked. He slowly nodded and said, ‘Yes, it caught my ear as it whizzed by my head and stuck in a rock just about a foot behind my head.’”

As I listened intently, even at age twelve, I thought, *why would my dad keep something that had almost killed him?* My mother continued. “I know I must have looked scared and confused, and he said that he would get rid of it. I saw him wrap it in a rag and place it with the things he was going to throw away. I really thought he did. I haven’t seen that thing since the day he came home from the war. Rob, promise me that you won’t mention this to your father.”

“I promise.” And I never did.

The subject never came up again as long as I lived in my parents’ home. There were times I would sneak a glimpse at the scar on my father’s left ear. This was usually done when he was reading his newspaper or was

otherwise preoccupied. There were times he would gently massage it, and if he sensed anyone looking, he would slowly move his hand away as if he had just scratched an itch that really wasn't there.

My father left this earth the day before Thanksgiving in 1999. Part of realizing closure when one of your parents dies comes from looking through their possessions and deciding what to keep and what to give away. There were pictures, letters to my mother that were written over sixty years ago, and even several military commendations. Today, I have many of those pictures and have preserved them digitally because old black and white photographs tend to age slower than the actual subject matter printed on their surfaces. They were split-second moments of my parents lives, and today, they always bring smiles.

I never found that velvet pouch.

I don't think I would have wanted it anyway.

