

"Close the Distance"
(A memoir)

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I straightened my back and stood tall on my father's behalf as the honor detail from Jones-Lewis VFW Post 4687 came to attention and fired three simultaneous rifle volleys that cracked and echoed off the hillsides that surround the Combs Cemetery on Jumbo Road near Melbourne, Arkansas in Izard County. The sound of Taps that followed was beautiful on the afternoon of October 10th, 1995. The air was still; the birds held their song so as not to interfere with the music. We stood there together, the minister, my step-mother, Marguerite, my husband and children, my brother, Mark and two of my sisters, Patti and Leslie, beside his casket beneath the black burial tent as the bugler played.

*"Day is done, gone the sun,
From the lake, from the hills,
From the sky.
All is well, safely rest,
God is nigh.
Fades the light; And afar
Goeth day, And the stars
Shineth bright,
Fare thee well; Day has gone,
Night is on.
Thanks and praise, For our days,
'Neath the sun, 'Neath the stars,
'Neath the sky,
As we go, This we know
God is nigh"*

There is something magnificent and wholly appropriate in the twenty-four notes of this call with its strains both haunting and melancholy, yet at the same time, hopeful and saturated with peace. The echoes of it have lingered in my heart more than a decade after its tones ceased to vibrate in the crisp, autumn air-- echoes not unlike the memories that return to me of my father.

The flag was folded thirteen times by two members of the detail with loving precision into a tight triangle with the star field and three metal casings tucked inside, each casing representing a volley. As one man handed it to Marguerite, he said, "This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States Army in appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

"Thank you," she said softly. I remember her whole being seemed numb with grief. She looked frail. She took his flag and held it to her chest.

I held my memories.

Looking For My Father

I lost my father long before he died. I lost him after my parents divorced when I was thirteen in the way people slip from your life even though you'd rather they remain. And because we both had lives to lead, and he'd moved to the side of a mountain and built a rustic home with his own two hands where he lived simply and close to nature.

When he and Marguerite were life-flighted and then hospitalized in Memphis at the Elvis Presley Trauma Center after a car accident, my sister, Patti, drove us kids to see them. Thankfully, they both recovered, though I don't think he was ever as strong after that. Families come together in crisis. I think our family also lost him to the alcohol he self-medicated his anxiety with, cigarettes, heart disease, and the hardships of his own childhood.

The writer, Sheila O'Connor, wrote, "We're all searching for our fathers, even when we have them. You're searching for your father, I'm searching for my father, and my husband is searching for his. The absent

father, the distant father, the angry father--that's what we are searching for." My search for mine has often led me in confusing circles back to my own bittersweet childhood with its mixture of joy and sorrow, and in turn, to the woman I've become who now shelters the little girl I was.

My father operated a convenience store in Arkansas. On my birthday or Christmas, he'd send packages, often containing items from it like a flashlight or a ceramic egg with a pink rose painted on it which I still cherish. He'd always sign the card himself, for I recognized his handwriting and that meant a great deal to me. He once sent a VHS tape with his narration of the deer and wildlife in his yard for my son. I understand at this stage in my life and after having been through a divorce that all were ways of reaching out to say, "I haven't forgotten you, though things have changed."

My first husband, Steve, drove us down to Arkansas to attend the funeral. The roadsides and mountains were dressed in burnt-orange, red, and yellow leaves. The song "Kissed by A Rose on the Grave" played many times on the way there. I couldn't eat food or I'd get ill on the trip down and for about a week after. Many relatives were already there at the funeral home when we arrived. My paternal Grandmother Mamie was not among them. She had passed away earlier that year on January 4th which was my Dad's birthday. I remember kissing his cold forehead and I knew that his spirit was free and separate now from his body, but that his soul still existed. I tucked a photograph of us kids in front of the little farmhouse that had once been our home in the pocket of his suit coat so he would never be truly alone without us there in the grave. My adopted Korean-American sister, Susan (named Hae Sook Suh at birth) couldn't be there, but she was in the photograph and I felt she'd like that.

I thought of how he loved the songs, "The Green Beret," "A White Sports Coat and a Pink Carnation," and "When I was a Boy and Ole Shep was a Pup". He rooted for the Oklahoma Sooners and the Arkansas Razorbacks. He loved dogwood and redbud trees, deer, flowers, words, good food and drink, model train sets, his country, rivers, ponds and sunsets. He made some of the strangest stuff he called "chili" from any leftovers he could find in the refrigerator. I think he must've learned that when he was a bachelor.

I tried to write a short fiction story set in Breckenridge, Colorado as I spent seven days there. I have photographs and images of burnt-gray pinecones underfoot, blue columbine, mountain daisies, Icelandic poppies, chipmunks near the Blue River, fly fisherman, pyrite-flecked river rocks, lodge pole pines, and fresh snow fields on Peak 9 with a rose-peach and shadow-blue sunset against evergreen, and some of the heavy, morning dew covering the courtyard, steaming hot tub, and the garden below my suite, lit up by the sun and turned to thousands of transparent-watery gems of all sizes combined to make a sparkling, green carpet. But this story came in its place and I've taken artistic license.

Growing up, my family moved often like many military families do. My favorite home we had was a one-story house on a country road north of McLouth, Kansas. There was a detached garage with a tin roof on which raindrops sounded like metallic drumbeats during a storm, and where we'd have slumber parties or give theatrical productions or concerts written and presented by us kids. In that garage, my brother Mark and I once unsuccessfully argued to my Dad that we should be allowed to raise five newborn mice that we'd found and placed atop cotton balls in a little box.

"We'll feed them milk from a dropper," we'd promised. "We'll save them."

I can still see their helpless, hairless, pink bodies before I surrendered them. It's funny how our minds burn certain visual memories deeper than others.

"They are cute now but they'll only grow up and be adult mice," my father said. "And carry disease. I'm sorry but you can't keep them." There was kindness on his face but he didn't waiver.

Further back on the property was a rectangular chicken coop which my father later converted to a rabbit barn. Surrounding all of this, was twenty-five acres of glorious pasture land, with a tree-lined creek running through it, east to west. Near the back of the acreage was a large pond where we'd all fish and swim, and where my dad would gig for frogs, with a can of beer in one hand, a gig in the other, and more often than not, wearing his best dress shoes, a detail which drove my mother crazy. My father built a cabin back beside the pond. He never did finish the roof.

I was eleven that year, and my school announced a state-wide writing competition for sixth graders called "Why I Love America." I'd never written anything for a contest and I wasn't sure where to start but I planned to enter.

The evening before my essay was due, I remember sitting at the kitchen table and staring at the blank pages of a Big Chief tablet. After pouring through "The Book of Knowledge" set, I finally had several pages of what I considered to be patriotic paragraphs.

"Dad, will you please read this for me and tell me what you think of it?"

He seemed pleased I'd ask for his help, and he responded, "Sure." So I handed it to him half expecting him to accept it as it was written. For a self-conscious girl, I often held a high opinion of my capabilities, which seems an odd contradiction. I had the kind of feeling a girl can have when she wonders if she isn't perhaps, because of all the fairy tales she's read, truly a foreign princess, kidnapped at birth and doomed to a middle class existence unless she's rescued by P. Charming.

In that cramped kitchen, under a starry mid-western sky, I waited for the gratification of hearing how well he thought I'd done. I recall my Mom, Bernice, was cooking at the stove. My mom is a pretty woman, and slender, with auburn hair and freckles. We used to twist together to Fats Domino music.

"Donna, did you know that your father earned dual degrees in business and in finance from O.U. in Norman? He double-majored with a 4.00 while he worked full-time. He made "As" and hardly ever even had to study."

"I didn't know that," I answered her. I looked at him with more appreciative eyes.

"And everyone always said he should write a book ... he can write so easily," she added. "He used to write me the most beautiful love letters."

I nodded and started to memorize a kitchen poem on a plaque on the wall for something to calm me while I waited for his review.

My father read my work and looked me directly in the eyes and said, "I think what they want to know is why 'you' love America. Not merely why America is great, but what it means to you, a young girl, right now, here in Kansas. Why do you, Donna Lash, love America? They don't want to hear history repeated or mere facts and dates from an encyclopedia. Your thoughts are what they want."

I'm sure my disappointment must have been evident to him, as I don't have a poker face. I had so hoped I'd done well and it was finalized. Basically, he wanted me to go back to the drawing board. I couldn't bear it. Could I do it? I felt panicky. It was too late to start over as I'd procrastinated till the night before.

Looking back, I believe this evening sticks in my mind because what he was telling me was what I needed to hear more than anything and knowing me well, he knew it. He was showing me that what I had to say was important, as important as what anyone else had to say. And this is a lesson I'm still trying to learn. I've approached it from all directions.

That evening also stands out because my Dad and I didn't do all that many things together. I have a few special memories like the time he carried me on his shoulders when I was three up the wide stone steps to Heidelberg Castle in Germany and down and then back up again after retrieving the stuffed puppy with a red leather collar he'd bought me that I'd dropped at the bottom on our first trip up. The golden cocker-spaniel sits on my shelf now. Or when he took me to feed bread to the ducks at a pond on a military base, or to buy an outfit for a junior high dance once so I didn't have to wear hand-me-downs from my sisters. And again when I was a teenager with a broken-heart I was sure would be fatal, how we planted red bud trees together in the sunshine to heal me. We shared several talks after my parent's divorce though we were always struggling to see the world through each other's perspective. I've come to believe that I am like my father in that we are both a contradictory mix of sophisticated and unpolished, joy and sorrow, light and dark, and serenity and anxiety. We both tend to tremendously overanalyze.

As we discussed writing that night, I had my Dad's full attention. He didn't leave me high and dry. He rescued me when I was in need. He stopped to teach me and share things he'd learned. And I, a middle child, felt special in his eyes.

I think he guided me through the essay from start to conclusion, but they were my words that he pulled from me. I wish I still had a copy of it. He asked me, "What do you like to do in America? What does it mean to you?"

And I answered, "I like to go to our creek and the pond, hide in the tall pasture grass on a blanket. I like to read books while eating Fig Newtons and riding my bike down the dirt road with Janice Kitterman, and playing Lincoln logs and pirate ship with Mark."

He told me, "You can do these things, because you're free to do them. In many countries, kids aren't free to do these things. They don't have enough food to eat, water to drink, or clothes to wear. No safe place to sleep."

"I'm lucky then aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. Remember to be grateful."

"Be thankful to God," my mom added.

My father was many things in his life from a federal air marshal to a soldier stationed at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico where he met my mother and I where I was born. What I picture him most

as was a Sgt. First Class in the U.S. Army who served in Korea and Vietnam. I understand more clearly now the point he was trying to make about the topic of the contest. I only knew back then that I wanted to win the so that I would be more than ordinary. I feared being ordinary the most, and still do, but to a far lesser degree.

I can relate to my father more now as my son is a Corporal in the United State Marine Corp, and my husband, Joe, is a USMC Vietnam Vet who defended the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, when it was attacked during the Tet Offensive. He raised the U.S. flag back over the embassy after they took it back. And I have seen "love of country" in their eyes and actions. Yet, what mattered back then at eleven, was that I was the happy recipient of my father's attention.

My essay (or ours) did win the school competition! I was called up front at the school assembly and awarded a certificate and a wood plaque. Engraved on the brass was the inscription, "Why I Love America--Donna Lash--Honorable Mention, State of Kansas." I had won First Place in my school and Honorable Mention in the State. And in my mind, I was surely not as ordinary as I'd been before this.

My father led me to the joy of creation. I can still see him in my mind's eye so clearly that I am actually transported back to that table and that exact moment in time. He's wearing a white t-shirt. I can smell through the open screen window, the four o'clock blossoms that lined the front of the house. I can smell the pot roast cooking in the stove and see the white fridge against one wall. I can see the kitchen poem on the wall I memorized while he studied my writing and can still recite it. It's difficult to be anxious when you are intent and focused on something like a prayer or a poem. That focus can protect you sometimes from the pain and confusion of the present. Sometimes I'd sit at a meal and memorize that little plaque.

"God bless my little kitchen Lord
I love it's every nook
And watch me as I do my work
Wash pots and pans and cook
May the meals that I prepare
Be seasoned from above
With thy blessing and they grace
But most of all thy love"

I can still hear cars passing infrequently on the gravel road. But clearest of all, I see my Dad vividly as he lights a cigarette even though one still smoulders in the tray and has turned to one, long, gray ash. I can feel my joy rise as he asks me my thoughts and opinions. I love my father for that shared memory that night. A night, so long ago in fact, that it might as well be some other lifetime, or some child other than me.

About a year ago, I found an old poem he wrote for his Mother. He wrote it when he was in high school. I was surprised to learn that he wrote poetry as I do. I think that though so much has already been written, that we must all add our verses for the world to be complete. We must say, write, or live out our stories while we can. Sometimes our stories are simple but they are still invaluable because they are ours and sometimes they are a large part of all we have.

My father left me more than a broken pocket watch that keeps imperfect time. He passed on the gifts of what mattered to him. He passed on all he had to give including the gift of his love for planting and growing things and his love of words and the knowledge that they can help us convey our true souls to one another; how words can close the distance.