

Dear Sharon

I would listen to him during our breaks and it seemed that nothing else in the world mattered but what he was telling me right there and then, because there is always something special about a father telling his son a story. On sultry Sundays, spread out on the green expanse of the backyard lawn, freshly trimmed by an inseparable duo, my father would tell me stories. Our matching, plain-white T-shirts were thrown to the ground, and the smell of gasoline from the lawnmower engine circled in the air among the soft breezes. The grass itched my back as I laid and watched my father gulp down his Dr. Pepper in two drinks, ignoring the burn of the carbonation, culminating in a loud, manly belch that I would attempt to mimic, only to have the sting of the cola bubbles burn my eyes and nose. The sun warmed my belly as I began to watch my father's stubbled, Sunday jaw bounce up and down, as the soft vibrations of his voice tickled my ears and fancy. He mixed his enamels, posted his canvas, and began to paint fantastic stories, each with its own design, beauty and relevance. They became the labels attached to ragged photographs, fables told over a small dining room table in a 1970's styled kitchen, or poems said with meters that wrapped me like a blanket. They became the very substance that formed my image of him. I grew to know the man in his stories. They taught me who my father was.

Vietnam: 1969

It was much hotter. The air was as thick as a wet rag, and the mosquitoes were as big as silver dollars. They gave us bug repellent that smelled like anise oil. The plants grew so heavily that, in places, I couldn't see the sky. It was eternal darkness. It also rained, sometimes for days. The only thing I could do was listen to the rain pitter patter on my helmet. I spent most of my time thinking of my home, my family, and the life I left behind. I wondered if I would ever see those things again. We only had one change of underwear, so after a couple of days, I just turned them inside out. We bathed in murky waters, while the village women washed their clothes upstream. It smelled like smoke, sweat and jungle all in one. I had a few friends, but none really to speak of today. Mostly, I would write your mother. You see, this was before we were married, and she was all that I had.

*Dear Sharon,
It's hot today. Hollywood and I walked three clicks in
knee-deep water when we got real close to some action. I
wrote your name on my helmet, so you'll always be close.
Nothing too bad yet. I'll be home soon.
Woody*

I wrote your mother every day. More than 300 letters
crossed this earth to reach her. It was a sad and lonely
time for me.

My father's eyes gazed into the sky as he recalled his
twenty-first year, far away in an exotic land. His voice
didn't tremble, and he didn't show much emotion. Although
in later years I was able to see the look that I did not
catch back then, in that modest, suburban setting. He had
already lived many lives and the lines that defined them
were as apparent as the thick, gray scratches of a pencil.
His tanned and rough skin, his labored hands did not match
the kindness in his eyes. He was like the weathered deck
of a seafaring ship, away for hundreds of years, and his
patriarchal voice told the stories of a thousand voyages.
He was a businessman now, and he knew many people. He
worked long and hard hours, sometimes staying for what
seemed like days. The angelic glow from his eyes passed to
anyone he touched, always making them laugh or smile.

He also kept things. In a box, high on a shelf in his
closet was a collection of nostalgia that he collected
since his first baby teeth fell from his mouth. My
grandmother told me he once planted a baby tooth in the
garden, hoping he would find it in the future. He never
found the tiny preserves jar that held his treasure.
Nevertheless, an enormous rose bush twenty feet high grew
from the very spot. It attracted angels and leprechauns.

He occasionally displayed this box, made of rosewood but
smelling of pine, and all of its contents. In it were
hundreds of worthless items that magicians and gypsies used
to conjure spells and lift curses. He even had a tooth of
a large tiger attached to a necklace. It was a magical
tooth that was his protection in the war, because with it,
he could tell the future and summon the gods.

Vietnam: 1969

One night, when the rain was coming down in sheets so heavy
I could not see my own hands, a buddy and I were up for

watch duty. We rotated in shifts, every hour and a half, trading the post for a sleep. I looked down at my issued watch, praying for our shift to be over. When it rained like this, I tended to lose concentration, and begin to count the number of drops that pelted my helmet. I was relieved when my watch shift was over. I sought refuge in a tiny cave left by Buddhist monks, lit a cigarette, and tried to sleep. I could not forget about your mother.

Dear Sharon,

It was raining hard tonight. Hollywood and I are on duty and it's my turn to sleep. I cannot stop thinking of you and when I will be home. It is even hotter tonight, despite the rain, but I can only think of when we will be together again. See you soon.

Woody

The rain stopped without any sign, and the sky immediately opened. The air was so hot that the wet jungle began to breathe and exhaust clouds of steam that lined the moist floor. The moonlight came cascading down upon the rainspotted fauna, glistening into thousands of angelic eyespots. I took my helmet off to touch the spot where I had written your mother's name. I felt relieved at the touch of the armor's wet covering, and sat and listened to the sounds of a lonely, foreign jungle. The area around me was completely mute. The only sound was my breathing that echoed throughout the entire jungle. Something was not right.

My father's stories always had a way of making me feel very involved, almost directly. I was scared and he knew it. The shadow caused me to shiver, as a slight chill passed through my young body. He simply smiled, and the lines around his eyes creased and folded into tiny crows' feet. My father's Goliath body moved out from between the sun and myself, and I immediately felt the warmth of the sun's rays on my outstretched belly. He sat on the lawn next to me in his faded denim jeans and Sunday work boots that he had since he was sixteen. The boots had never been resoled, despite the fact they carried him up the Sierra Nevada Mountains in search of the world's largest freshwater trout. He remained in the snow-covered peaks for twelve years until he returned with the skeleton of a fish that was over one hundred feet long, and had teeth like jackknives. He claimed that he met a tribe of ancient hidden Indians, and they exchanged ideas on how to cure the

sick, and the best ways to tie fishing knots. They made him an honorary member of the tribe, and he often spoke in their language while he slept.

Vietnam: 1969

A light flashed into the sky, and the crack-crack of machine gun fire recoiled in the distance. The lights, as from a wizard's fingers, splintered all around into the wet bark of the trees around me. I was covered in the fog up to my shoulders. The jungle was lit up like a movie set from the nearby rocket fire, but I could see no other movement. I sat up to call for help on the radio, but the proximity of the molten metal smashing into the dense plant life caused me to take cover. I did not know where my counterpart was, and I could not tell in what direction the relief point was. I was pinned.

Dear Sharon,

I had a close call tonight. There was machine gun fire everywhere and I lost my group. The sky was lit up like Hermosa Beach on the fourth. All I could think of was, "How am I going to get out of this?"... I was scared.

I have heard about flashbacks from friends who had fathers in the same situation, but dad had maintained a quiet confidence unrivaled by any man I have ever seen. It was only years later that I discovered the ominous pounding of helicopters gave my father a start, but were nothing like the popular films and their portrayals.

An American Airlines howled loudly over head, landing or taking off at the international airport in the adjacent town. It broke my fathers' concentration as he shield his eyes to look up at the massive metal bird hurling itself through the smog laden air of Los Angeles. I saw my father's eyes gleam, like they were searching for something he had not yet found.

Vietnam: 1969

After a short while, I began to hear the footsteps on the wet leafy ground. At first, I thought it was one of my own. But a heard a tongue rattle in a distant language. I grew tense all over. Two men, I think they were men, approached me in camouflage. They had stick protruding from their helmets, and I could not make out the words they were saying. I felt like I was on the head of a pin. I ducked quickly, and my helmet rolled off of my head, and

your mother's name stared at me in the face. I plunged the armor back onto my head, and snugly tightened the straps.

Dear Sharon:

I did not know what else to do. The sight of your name, surrounded by a heart, that was my only means of protection gave me a heightened sense of reality that cannot be explained. At that instance, I was like an animal hunted by its predator. I tried to recall my training, but was overcome by an overwhelming instinct to just survive. But it was not that, but to you that I owe my thanks.

Woody

I could feel the bile boil in my intestines. I felt as if my father was in mortal danger as he spoke. He put his rough hand on my shoulder and gave me a warm smile. The sun gleamed off of his chipped bottom tooth, a tooth that I had damaged in an infant rage with a hairbrush. I felt my father's protective presence and I eased slightly.

Vietnam: 1969

The footsteps and talking stopped very suddenly. I laid there for what seemed like an insurmountable time, then slowly lifted my head to examine the scene. Hollywood was nowhere to be seen. Plants were strewn over the jungle floor, some still smoking from the mortared rounds. A soldier lay dead ten meters in front of me, and the overwhelming stench of loss filled the tropical air. The scene was littered with scattered equipment, smoking trees, and a fire that tarnished the moonlit sky. It was the first action I had seen, and the sight of death and destruction brought anger into my heart. I vowed never to speak of this to my children. I took off my helmet to wipe the sweat from my nervous brow, to touch your mother, to feel her close. My fingers traced over a blemish in the armor. Its flesh had been torn by in the very center of the heart that carried your mother's name. Initially, I cried. I wept out of fear because I had never been so near death. It now stared me in the face. I remembered being young, much like you, carefree and ruthless. I pushed my fingertips through the torn hole, feeling its sharp edges as they scraped against my protruding finger. I felt the pain as the scrapped folds cut into my finger, emitting streams of life giving fluids that fell to the jungle ground. I never saw action again.

I looked into my father's eyes, and then the surreal landscape. I saw a man and his angelic features. I searched for the boy in that jungle but I could not find him. He wore a tiger tooth around his neck on a rope made of hemp. He had left his innocence behind among the ashes.

We got up, finally, between the fresh-clipped grass and the yellow-orange sky. We put the machines back into the garage, next the bicycles and large American cars. We swept the walk, watered the lawn and flowers. The day, the air, my father's smile, nothing changed. The wild beating of my heart subsided to a medium rate, slowly pumping the blood through the caverns of my body. I smelled the grass, the trees, and the car exhaust from city streets. Dogs barked in their incomprehensible languages. Large airplanes hissed overhead, and the earth rotated on its axis in a vast universe. I walked up the steps to the front porch lined with small, green bushes. I looked back to see two sets of wet footprints on the weather-beaten wood of the deck. One was big, the other was small.