

The Pain of Love

the solemn beauty of life and loss

My mother turned her head slightly to one side, cast her gaze inward towards some distant but ever present pain and said, “But that wasn’t the hardest part. That would come in the weeks that followed.”

When she said that there were just four of us in the car: me, mom and two of her closest friends and we were on our way to a rented boat that would take us out to sea where we would scatter the ashes of my dad.

Mom was quiet. Her friends held her hands as she slightly shook trying to hold back the tears.

“You very stoic, Mary,” said one of her friends. “Well, I’ve been through this before,” said mom.

You see, mom had been married once before to a man named Harry. Now Harry was always someone I was aware of, but he was never discussed. Harry simply wasn’t a part of our family. My mom and dad raised my sister and myself.

I really don’t even know how long mom and Harry were a couple. I have no idea of their courtship. But I do know they married just before he left to serve in the army during WWII. I also know he was wearing a brand new uniform and waving goodbye when she saw him for the last time.

“I remember the day,” mom continued, “when I found out Harry had died. A car pulled up to the front of the house, two men in uniform got out and walked to the door. That’s when I knew...but that wasn’t the hardest part. That would come in the weeks that followed.”

That’s when another man in a different uniform would walk to the door. He delivered letters. Letters Harry had written and mailed weeks before. Letters that chronicled his time leading up to his death. Letters written in his hand and sealed with his lips.

Do any of us, *any of us*, have *any idea* what that is like anymore? What it must have felt like to not just read his thoughts...all the time knowing what was to come...but to see it in his own handwriting. Do we even remember what it's like to touch that type of paper?

Now, I was still feeling numb from dad's passing. But when mom mentioned Harry's letters, the ache of her heart washed over me. And with that taste everything

shifted....mom, her friends, the view from the car window, the loss of my father and the genuine sorrow my mother felt for him....everything came into an exquisite, bittersweet focus.

Given the richness of it all, I also wondered how did she get over not only the loss but get over her love for Harry.

Or had she? After all, she is bringing this up as we're on our way to scatter *my father's* ashes.

When we got to boat it took us just off the shoreline from the beach house mom and dad had built. My sister and I scattered rose petals...mom, the ashes...and on that day the sea was rough, the sky was gray, and the pain of love filled the air.

A few years pass. This time its just mom and me in the car. I'm taking her to see her sister, my aunt, and we were listening to one of those radio stations where there is news at the start of every hour.

I can't remember what story caught her attention but I clearly remember her comment: "Well that's just awful," said mom. "Who's ever heard of such a thing?"

The very next hour the very same story repeated word for word. Mom turned to me and said, "Well that's just awful. Who's ever heard of such a thing?"

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's was actually a strange type of comfort. At least I knew what we were facing.

We were very lucky. Throughout it all Mom always remained herself: warm and loving. It's just that, with Alzheimer's, a little less of her was there with the passing of each day.

Then it just happened. Naturally. Peacefully. The way she wanted.

Like I said, feeling the weight Harry's letters carried in mom's for heart half a century, I occasionally wondered how that deep love impacted her relationship with dad. But now having lost both my parents, I see it differently.

When love's hurt isn't from betrayal, when that hurt is born from fulfillment—no matter if it was in your life for decades or mere months—when love's hurt is born from fulfillment, it isn't something to get over. It is something to embrace....to treasure....to revere.

As we had for my father, we once again rented a boat. And this time, when it reached the same point off the shoreline of their beach house, others tended to the petals. My sister and I scattered ashes. And on this day, *on this day*, the sea was calm, the sky was blue, and the pain of love filled the air.