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Marybelle

When I think about these things in this way, the image of Marybelle comes into focus. Most of the time, she is blurred and indistinct, though I think she is always with me. But when I look at that time in my life in juxtaposition to my father's experiences, she is sharp and vivid.

I didn't know her well. She was in my class, fourth grade, at Makapu Elementary School, Kaneohe Air Station, Oahu, Hawaii. She was a homely, awkward girl who was very shy. She had dark hair and skin darker than mine. I think she may have been Hispanic. She was stocky – a stark contrast to my stick-figure body. I don't think any of us knew her. She was there much in the way our desks were there. She was quiet. She was always quiet.

There was that one day, it was spring I think, that has been seared into my memory. Like a branding, I have the outline – a symbol for something much bigger than the simple shape. Brandings hurt and the act creates scar tissue; scars may fade, but they never go away.

It's strange, but I remember Marybelle to have been wearing shoes. I'm almost sure she would have been barefoot. If wearing shoes, she most certainly would not have been wearing the hard-soled, stiff leather shoes that I see in my memory. It's also unlikely that she was wearing the red, full-skirted dress with puffy short sleeves and Peter Pan collar.

My memory may be hazy on some of the details, but I do know what happened that day and I know that it changed me in some way that I'm still struggling to understand.

I remember Marybelle sitting with her head hanging down, her shoulder length hair falling forward so that I, we, could not see her face. I see her with her hands folded in her lap, but I'm almost positive I'm making that up. Memories, childhood memories in particular, are

not to be trusted. If you do not have the words to describe what is happening when it is happening, is it possible to describe them accurately later? I don't know. It's further complicated if you understand what has happened, but not why. I've looked at the memory of that day as a fourth grader, a sixth grader, a high-schooler, a college student, a wife, a mother, and a daughter. I've talked about it with friends, but never with my family. Just now, after writing that sentence, I wonder why I've never talked about it with my family. I bet that would keep a therapist busy for months.

If it was spring, it was 1969 and I was 9. We were in Mrs. Hodges' class and most of us knew that we had lucked out. Mrs. Hodges was neat-o. It would be odd for Marybelle to have been wearing shoes, because none of us wore shoes. Each classroom had a large box just inside the door and each morning we kicked off our shoes, usually flip flops, into the box and sat at our desks. At the end of the day, we stuffed our shoes, along with any papers our mothers needed to see, into our lunch boxes and headed home.

It's not likely Marybelle was wearing shoes.

The dress I remember might be what she was actually wearing. The dress is much more vivid than the shoes.

Girls, most of us, wore straight, short, sleeveless and collarless dresses. Pants or shorts were out of the question. Girls did not wear such clothing to school in 1969. Our mothers usually made our dresses and they tended to be colorful prints – Hawaiian or geometric – or, if a solid color, a tropically bright color like hot pink or fluorescent orange. My dresses were liberally trimmed with rick-rack – a type of decorative edging that my mother liked. Think of that zig-zaggy stripe on Charlie Brown's shirt; rick rack is that shape.

It's possible that Marybelle wore that red dress. It could have been a hand-me-down from an earlier time and cooler climate. Military families are nomadic.

Being a kid in officer's housing on a military base in Hawaii would have been as good as it gets if Vietnam hadn't been raging. The base was well beyond capacity and the place was crawling with the last-gasp of the baby boomers. We were everywhere and the military catered to us. We had the best schools and our teachers had whatever they wanted in the way of teaching supplies. There were movie theaters, swimming pools, riding stables, hobby shops, playgrounds, and golf courses all within walking distance. Most of it was free with military I.D. I think movies cost a quarter. Horseback riding was free, but you had to have a permission slip. Parents didn't hover around their kids as they do now. We ran all over the place; military I.D.s and sweaty, eventually torn, permission slips stuffed into pockets or lunch boxes or beach bags. We were public property, though. Every adult on base had the authority and inclination to holler at us and tell us to settle down. We were as subject to orders as our fathers, and we mostly obeyed them.

Our house was across the street from the Officer's Club golf course. My brother and his friends would collect the golf balls that captains and majors and colonels would hit into our yard after a scotch or two too many and try to sell them back for a nickel apiece. Sometimes, we kept them and tried to cut them open, scaring ourselves silly with the common knowledge that they could explode and kill us - or at least blind or maim us. All of us kids knew this to be true, though none of us knew a single person so injured. We generally lost interest in opening them up long before we got to their centers, which were reputed to be some toxic liquid under intense pressure.

We had coconut trees in the yard. I was particularly adept at opening coconuts. It takes a fair amount of doing to husk a coconut and crack the nut to free the meat especially when your mother won't let you use a knife. I was allowed to use a hammer. Green coconuts are good for drinking, brown for eating. I didn't care for the juice.

I liked to sit with my back against the coconut tree and gnaw the coconut meat off the hard brown shell of the nut. There was a large plumeria bush next to the tree. Even now, the taste of coconut summons the fragrance of plumeria.

During the storms of the rainy season, I'd sometimes be woken out of a sound sleep to the threatening sound of coconuts falling on the roof. Falling coconuts scared me as did the lizards that lived on the ceilings. I was convinced the lizards would fall on me and I was ever-vigilant against such an event. One night, I exasperated my parents at the dinner table; I couldn't bring myself to eat as one of the ceiling-lizards clung directly above our dining table.

I was not a fearful child. Only these two things – falling coconuts and lizards scared me. I was, as now, an introverted extrovert. I think there have always been two of me. The quiet, analytical one that shunned the myriad of group activities my mother wanted for me in favor of a good book. And the other me, the one that excelled at and dominated the group activities Mama insisted I join. And so, I was a Girl Scout, a Sunday Schooler, a Vacation Bible Schooler, a baton student, and a Good News Clubber.

My mother found God when my Dad found Vietnam. Daddy found God in Vietnam.

Evil needs a counterpoint.

My dad says he only survived 'Nam because my mom prayed him through it.

His first tour spanned parts of 1966 and '67. I can't be sure, and I don't want to ask him, but I think my 7th birthday was the first one he missed. He wrote me a letter, carefully printed so I could read it myself. It said:

> *Dear Connie Lynn*
> *Well you are seven years old now. I am real sorry I couldn't be there to give you your birthday spanking.*
> *I am real sorry you have birthdays now. I hate to see you grow up. I am afraid that you will grow up so much that you won't want to give your daddy a big Hug and Kiss every night. Punkin, nothing makes me any happier then to feel your arms around my neck and to hear you say, "Daddy, I love you."*
> *Some girls as they get older forget to do this. That is why all daddys hate to see their punkins get older.*
> *To me you will always be the sweet precious little baby that I used to lay on my chest and sing to sleep. The song was not much, just "Oh Daddy's little girl" over and over until you would lay you head down and go to sleep.*
> *Very soon punkin I will be home again. We will go to church together and have all kinds of good fun. Please don't get to grown up to love your Daddy.*
> *I Love You*
> *"Daddy"*
> *HAPPY BIRTHDAY*

I cry whenever I read this letter, but not just because of the sweetness of the words. My father is, and has always been, an excellent writer. The grammatical errors in the letter are symbols. They are scar tissue.

My 7th birthday was in August of 1966. He wasn't home for Christmas that year either. I don't remember exactly when he came home, but by May of 1967 we had been transferred from Camp Pendleton in California to Kaneohe in Hawaii. He wasn't home for my 8th birthday in '67 either. He was back in Vietnam doing his second tour. By May of 1968, he was embroiled in the event of his life that would change everything.

The press release from Arlington Cemetery describes it as such:

> *The Marines were part of an artillery platoon airlifted to provide support to the 11th Mobile Strike Force, which was under threat of attack from North Vietnamese forces near Kham Duc in South Vietnam. On May 9, 1968, the Strike Force had been directed to reconnoiter an area known as Little Ngok Tavak Hill*

> *near the Laos-Vietnam border, in the Kham Duc Province. Their base came under attack by North Vietnamese Army troops, and after a 10-hour battle, all of the survivors were able to withdraw from the area.*

In another release dated August 11, 2005:

> *The remains of 12 servicemen, listed as missing in action during the Vietnam War, have been identified and are returning home, 37 years after they died in a fierce battle near the Laos-Vietnam border, the U.S. Defense Department announced yesterday.*

http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/vietnam-recoveries-august-2005.htm

One of those men was Private First Class William D. McGonigle. As his commanding officer, my dad was charged with writing the "we regret to inform you" letter to his mother. That the men were listed as MIA was a mistake based on a rumor that became truth only because so many people wished it to be so. There was no doubt among those there that the twelve were dead, but the rumor persisted and they were classified MIA.

Mrs. McGonigle didn't take the news well. She and my dad exchanged a series of letters. The way I understand this story is that my dad wrote her explaining the fierceness of the battle, the certainty of death, and the inability to retrieve any of the remains. In military culture, you always "bring them home." It was shameful for my dad and the other survivors that those twelve had been left behind. Mrs. McGonigle wrote back and asked if they'd been able to retrieve his dog tags. Or maybe it was his class ring. I can't remember the details. I don't think I want to. And I'm not going to ask. But my dad wrote her back and explained yet again. This went on for several letters. PFC McGonigle, Billy, and his mother have haunted my dad all these years.

I don't have a letter from him for my 8th birthday. I suspect I have a tape, though. My dad was, and is, a gadget geek. We had tiny tape players that used reel-to-reel tapes about the size of a coaster. My mother, brother and I would "talk" to him and send the tape off. He would

tape over our conversation with his own. I remember lots of evenings talking to Daddy through a microphone.

He was home for my 9th birthday in the August before I started fourth grade. We had dinner at The Pagoda Restaurant in Honolulu. The restaurant was a series of open air teahouses strung together by a boardwalk over a large Koi pond. I had mahi mahi for the first time and he teased me that I was eating Flipper. After dinner, we sat on the boardwalk and watched the fish. Hawaii was a good place to be a kid.

I'm not sure exactly when, childhood memories get blurry, but he was off again. We were told he was on a six-month cruise around the Philippines. He was, in fact, back in 'Nam. His third tour. We weren't allowed to know where he was.

I was in fourth grade and my mother, as did most of the mothers, sheltered my brother and I from the war. She watched the news after we went to bed. No theatrics. She was the good Marine wife.

I was never sleepy at bedtime, but I was made to go. I would lay in bed and worry about a lizard falling on me. The lizards were tiny, only a few inches long, and very slender. They looked to be quite fragile and were welcomed in homes as they kept the bug population down. We never called them geckos and it's not rational that I was afraid of them.

On Friday afternoons at school, Mrs. Hodges got out the record player and we pushed our desks up against the wall. The television show Laugh-In was a national phenomenon and we re-created the party scene ever Friday. She'd play a piece of music and we'd all dance wildly. I see us in my mind and I'm reminded of the Peanuts cartoon characters and their joyful dances.

Mrs. Hodges would lift the needle, the music would stop, and she'd point at one of us. We were expected to recite a poem, say something witty, or if devoid of any inspiration at least offer a "Sock it to me" or "Here comes the judge." Everyone had at least one turn.

We were enthusiastic participants in our bare feet. We danced and laughed so hard we could barely speak when it was our turn. We planned our act all week. Some of us practiced. We watched Laugh-In for inspiration. Oh yes. You can *bet your sweet bippy*, we did. Many of us brought props: a ukelele for the Tiny Tim impersonator, a plastic flower for the recitation of a Henry Gibson poem. (*That was me. "I keep my money in my sock/it's really very neat,/but all the people on my block/say I have lumpy feet*.) I suppose it's odd that a bunch of military brats had such a great, groovy time rocking out to our impressions of a liberal, controversial show. It's a wonder our parents didn't put an end to it.

These days I work for a small nonprofit that works to prevent the mental and physical abuse of children. While drafting a fundraising letter, I ran across the following quote by Emerson: *we find delight in the beauty and happiness of children that makes the heart too big for the body*. On Friday afternoons, on most afternoons, we were beautiful and happy, bright and shiny.

I don't remember Marybelle on Friday afternoons.

I'm sure it was towards the end of the school year – spring of 1969. There was a knock on the classroom door and someone from the principal's office came and took Marybelle out of class. We all looked at each other with curiosity. Nothing like this had ever happened before. I think we were all relieved it wasn't us. Going to the principal's office is never a good thing.

After a while, Marybelle returned. She sat in her seat. Her head was bowed, her shoulders slumped. Her hair was hiding her face. I want her hands to be folded in her lap, but I

don't think they were. Red dress. Shoes. The sun was bright on the blackboard. I couldn't read all the words. The sun bounced off the glass of the large windows and the light fractured Marybelle. She sat in the middle of the row closest to the door. I saw a glint.

Tears.

Haloed by sun, as if the subject of an ecclesiastical painting, Marybelle silently cried. Her hair was hiding her face, but I could see the tears drop, making tiny rivulets on the glossy Formica top of her desk. She was very still – very quiet. Marybelle was always quiet. She was beautiful in that moment though she was not happy. My heart got too big for my body though I wasn't delighted. I felt a fear that in contrast rendered my lizard phobia a mild dislike.

The classroom was silent. Nobody teased her. We knew this was important. We didn't know what, but we sensed something. I think as we grow we become less intuitive. We need more words, more pictures and concrete details. I didn't need them then and I don't think my classmates did either. We knew. Scar tissue was forming.

Later, the following day, I think, Mrs. Hodges told us that Marybelle's father had died in Vietnam. Mrs. Hodges said "died." She did not say "killed". Marybelle never returned to class after that scarred day.

I don't know why they returned Marybelle to the classroom after telling her of her father's death. We brats were catered to, pampered, indulged. I don't understand that act of cruelty. I do understand that it was not designed to be cruel. Someone probably thought she needed as much normalcy as possible. The abuse was not intentional. It often is not.

My father came home and stayed home for a time – home being a group of people and not a place. We transferred from Hawaii to Virginia and then to North Carolina. In 1972, I turned thirteen. My father was in Japan and due home soon. He wrote me an exceptional letter.

I'd love to share it, but I've torn my house apart looking for it and have not yet been able to find it. Military brats tend towards one extreme or the other: we're packrats or we save nothing. I'm one of the former. I know I have it. I just can't find it.

In this letter, he tells me that he's diligently searching for my requested birthday presents. I'd asked for a number of things including the latest albums by Three Dog Night and Gordon Lightfoot. As for Gordon, he reported he'd tracked down an Indian by the name of Howie Heavythighs panhandling in Tokyo, but no such luck on the Lightfoot. He tells me in closing that it is getting late and he needs to sleep, but first he has to go outside because he hears some barking out by the garbage cans. He's hopeful that he'll find a birthday present.

He didn't send me bad music for my birthday. He sent me flowers with a card that said he wanted to be the first man to ever send me flowers.

He was.

Years later, after he was out of the Marine Corps, after his post traumatic stress syndrome peaked and he landed in the psychiatric ward, we learned that he wasn't in Japan. Well, he was, but he was slipping in and out of 'Nam doing his fourth tour in the closing days of the war.

That grieving mother to whom he wrote those sad condolence letters, Mrs. McGonigle, haunted him the way Marybelle haunts me.

He went to as many of the funerals of his 12 men as he could. Some of the families decided on private services. Others had large ceremonies. He was asked to speak at several of the funerals including the large ceremony at Arlington in October. He met Mrs. McGonigle. The cried together.

I can't remember Marybelle's last name, but I share some of her scars.