A Patriotic Journey

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As I fly into Washington D.C, I see the Washington Monument towering in the center of the city. Holding my breath, filled with elation, I quickly discover it is difficult to write about the excitement. But, somehow, it seems like it is an honor to be here, like it isn’t just my right as a citizen of the United States; it is my duty to see the city our nation—my nation—calls its capital. I giggle at myself when I write, “I am a patriot,” just before the plane lands. I wonder, “Why does the sight of the Washington Monument shake my very being?”

Seeing the American flag flying high at Ronald Reagan National Airport, I feel my hand rise towards my chest. I laugh at myself and think of my students—how I get absolutely livid when they don’t say the pledge in the morning, when they grudgingly stand, like it’s a chore. But what is this need to defend the flag in the morning as our principal says the pledge? Where does this patriotism come from? Why am I even like this? Wandering through my thoughts, I stop at my parents. The older I get, the more I see my parents in me: my mom’s laughter, her passive-aggressive tactics, her fun-loving ways, her ability to take most things in stride. From my daddy—his occasional short temper, his love for people, his search for knowledge—most of that is from my daddy. But patriotism just seems innate to me, something I’ve always felt. I can’t recall ever not knowing the Pledge of Allegiance or the National Anthem. Driving to the hotel late at night, I pause to take in the beauty of the Washington Monument’s reflection in the Potomac River, and right now I know with certainty where this patriotism comes from—this part of me is my daddy. I remember standing in the Assumption High School football stadium with my daddy, long before I was ever a student there, watching games on Friday nights. Always before the game started, we’d stand with the crowd and I’d belt through the National Anthem, and he’d sing just a little louder than me to cover up the parts that I’d miss or mess up, my hand on my chest, his hat and hand on his. Standing together, saluting and singing, my daddy subtly taught me what it means to be a part of something bigger than the football game or our little town; we were joined by some kind of solidarity I was only beginning to understand, a solidarity that he’d played a part in, the solidarity that comes from fighting for something greater than yourself.

His part came along in 1966, shortly after his graduation from that same high school, with 1A draft status, certain of his being drafted, my daddy enlisted in the United States Navy. He decided to give four years of his life to the military branch of his choice at the height of the Vietnam War. He made two tours in the Tonkin Gulf, part of the South China Sea, in the working part of the Navy on the Ammunition Aircraft Carrier Support Task Force ship, the USS Camden, never stepping foot on Vietnamese soil.

My daddy has seen parts of the world I may never get to see: the Philippines,

Hong Kong, Japan, Europe. Nevertheless, I can’t get him to come to Baton

Rouge on at Saturday night to see the LSU Tigers play. I remember being at an LSU football game for Veteran’s Day weekend, watching the fighter jets fly over the stadium as “God Bless the USA” ended, and getting the *frissons*, wishing I could see him salute, signifying his status as a veteran, wanting him to stand with me and sing, to be there with me to see it.

I have that feeling again as I slowly walk through the Arlington National Cemetery, toward the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Here, amongst the more than 300,000 graves, I struggle to take it all in. The gravestones go on for what seems like miles. I can’t see where they stop. Looking around, just thinking of what these people went through, the magnitude of what they were willing to give up for an ideal consumes my thoughts, and the one thing I want at this moment, more than my daddy knowing I am here, is for him to be here with me. I text him, “I am at Arlington National Cemetery.” My phone vibrates. It’s Daddy calling me. I pick up and whisper, “Daddy?” His voice cracks,

“You’re going to make me cry,” but he already is crying, and as soon as I hear it, tears well up in my eyes. After a brief, quiet conversation about where I am specifically at the cemetery, his emotion obvious, he says, “You just gave me the *frissons*, Chelle.” I am crying with him, promising to tell him all about my trip when I get home as we hang up. I feel simultaneously sad and hopeful.

Later, as I walk toward the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, I know that my sadness comes from the fact that he isn’t here with me. He has given me this love for my country, but I can’t share this experience with him. Just outside the memorial, I page through the catalog, scanning thousands of names, birthdays, hometowns, ranks, and dates of death, in disbelief. Turning, I see the bronze sculpture called The Three Servicemen towering over me—three uniformed soldiers carrying the equipment of war, looking somewhat vulnerable with their eyes fixed on the wall. Quietly walking past the reflective granite panels of the wall, I feel a little hopeful that my daddy and I will be back to see this place together one day. More specifically, I hope that he is proud of me, his daughter, here in Washington, DC. I am here because of him. I can’t shoot a gun, but I know what it’s like to want to defend my country. I can’t fold a flag, but I know what it means to fly one. Every day, for as long as I can remember, one has graced my parent’s home, and when I’d ask why he never took it down, through the rain and the bad weather, he’d say, “Bay, that flag has seen a lot worse than that.” I don’t have military plates on my vehicle, but I know what it means to see them. My dad’s US Navy plates always did make me proud.

And even though I have never worn a military uniform or served my country in any capacity greater than teaching in a classroom, I am patriotic. Amidst everything that the all-knowing “they” say about our generation being characterized by selfishness and disrespect, my daddy taught me what a privilege it is to be a citizen of the this nation, to know what it means to love the intangible ideal that this country thrives on, to be moved by a man or woman in uniform, to appreciate what they give and what they gave. I weep because he does. Because he shows me what it means to be a patriot.