

“Come Home”

Essay by Melodee Stromotich, Branch #118 North Vancouver

My father has a photograph on the wall. It lives in the space above the bowl of keys next to the front door: one of the first things you see when you come home, and the last when you leave.

I don't think about the photo much growing up. It never occurs to me. It's simply there. Like the fixtures on the mantle, the notches in the door frame, the creaks in the stairs. It's a part of our house, familiar and loved in its own way, even if I don't know why we have it.

I don't ask until I'm old enough to have kids of my own, and return to my childhood home once more. My children run across the lawn I mowed every summer, through the garden I planted with poppies reaching for the shining sun.

My father huffs on the cigar pinched between his teeth, smoke billowing out his nose like a freight train. “They were my friends.”

I look at the photograph again. It was once black and white, but time has yellowed its edges and bleached corners. It's a group of four men wearing army uniforms, huddled together in front of a tank taller than all of them.

They're hardly men, the closer you look. Each of their faces hold the same youthful grins, eyes squinted against sunlight. Their arms stretch out, resting on friendly shoulders. Pulling each other into a group hug. The camaraderie and laughter echo off the paper like whispers.

My father, on the left side, looks younger than I've ever seen him. His wiry frame has him standing tallest in the photograph, all long limbs and awkward posture. He's so boyish it brings a gentle smile to my face.

My father still carries with him a pocket knife in his boot, and a haunted look tucked behind his eyes we never comment on. My mother told me once, when I was knee-high and curious, that we should not ask him about what happened in the war.

“What were they like?” I ask, for the first time in my life. It's a question I didn't realize burned at my tongue with curiosity for years.

The man on the right wears a hat too large on his head, tipping forward into his eyes. He was quite the good singer, my father tells me, his voice soft and reminiscent. He had owned a harmonica that was quickly confiscated, in order to spare everyone's ears, since he couldn't hold a tune with anything but his voice.

The man next to him lived just a town over. His smile is lopsided and mischievous, his ears big and wide. Him and my father had reminisced about the blowing wheat fields they could run through for hours, and the rolling hills they'd sled

down once winter set in. They were each other's little piece of home, reminding them it's still there for them to return to.

The man next to my father has dimples shining through the fading photograph. He had a sweet tooth bigger than Alberta, my father chuckles. He'd savour his chocolate bars for as long as he could, trading cigarettes for another. Though he was kindhearted, and willing to break his bar with someone else if they needed a pick-me-up.

My father's voice carries the memories to my ears gently. Showing me these delicate treasures he's cared for so many years, so I may cradle them and hold them safe. Preserving them for the day I can pass it down to my own children to protect.

"What happened to them?" I ask, hesitant and suspecting.

He sighs, his voice rough from emotion and years of smoke, "They died."

"I'm sorry." I say, which feels inadequate. How does one properly convey how awful it is, to lose another soul you cared for? A friend? A brother? Family?

"I put them up by the door so they can see everyone they fought for get to come home."

He claps my shoulder, his grief bleeding through, his weight settling on my frame. I can't tell if he's leaning on me to convey his pain, or for support as his old bones tug him earthward.

His jaw quivers. It's jarring, as I've never seen my stoic father so near tears. "They fought for peace. So I could have you, and you and your kids could live in peace, and get to grow up and grow old. The least I could do was bring them back to my home."

I've seen this photograph every day of my childhood, passing the hall on my way into a beautiful world that these men will never see. A world I get to live in because of their sacrifices.

I never look at the picture the same again.

Lest we forget.