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ESSAYS, MEMOIRS, & TRUE STORIES

Her Pillow

BY BRIAN DOYLE • JUNE 2014

y grandmother lived with us for eight years when I was a child. She was grim and happy and equitable and unjust all at once. I think now that I learned a great deal from her about how people really are without realizing I was learning anything. She did not like me or my next brother down and forbade us to sit on her reading chair or her bed. We were forbidden to use her bathroom too. We could watch the television in her room only if we were accompanied by our older sister, whom everyone thought was sweet and gentle, so everyone wondered how it was that such a sweet and gentle being could be so swiftly obeyed by her rambunctious younger brothers, and the reason was a sharp fist in your ear. We were allowed to watch the installation of Pope Paul VI and the funeral of Robert F. Kennedy on our grandmother's television. We were not allowed to watch men walking on the moon because she did not approve of the moon landing and thought it arrogant and suspect. She favored our sister because she was a girl and could therefore be educated properly. Our sister is now a nun in a monastery. Our grandmother favored the youngest among us because he was new and therefore could be educated properly. He is now president of a high school. But my next brother down and I were older and beyond her reach, and she despaired of us, and that is why I am a muddled poet and he is a carpenter. Sometimes she would sigh audibly when we tumbled into view and sometimes she would make tart comments and sometimes she would be goaded into delivering cutting remarks and our mother would say, *Mother!* and our grandmother would retire to her room to seethe. She sometimes spent the day seething. You never saw anyone better at being ostentatiously offended.

She was Irish. Her room was next to the dining room and if we ate too loudly she would be offended and close her door. I can still hear that door being closed all these years later. One time we tried to throw the youngest among us through her door for complicated reasons and our father, who never lost his temper, lost his temper, and so we learned how to saw and plane and shellac wood. The new door was made of ash, and my next brother down is now a master woodworker. The youngest among us could sit in our grandmother's reading chair and watch television without supervision, and our sister could sit on her bed and touch her photographs of her late husband, but not even our sister was allowed, under any circumstances, to touch or recline on her pillow. Our grandmother's pillow, more than anything else, smelled like her. Her scent was talcum powder and lavender and rosary beads and butter and rectitude. You could tell where she had been in the house by the trail of her scent, as heavy in the air as a song, but her scent was most adamant above her pillow. Perhaps that is why our sister's cat one day curled up on her pillow and delivered three infinitesimally small naked horrifying kittens, each one emerging in a sort of moist sandwich bag while my brothers and I watched from a few inches away. The cat patiently licked the wet gunk from the kits, and magically their fur appeared.

Our grandmother had been at Mass, and when she returned she found us in her room with the cat and the kittens huddled on her pillow and it seems to me that everything exploded after that. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were murdered and the war got worse and our sister left for college and we had to watch the

moon landing on the little television in the family room. Some of our neighbors came over and crowded around the television with us and because my brothers and I were short we could hardly see. Our grandmother got smaller by the day and died at the end of that ferocious summer, as shriveled and withered and bent as the dry rattling plants and bushes around our house. The youngest among us thought she would be buried in the yard and reconstituted by the autumn rains, but this did not happen. Her television came into the family room and the little television went down to the basement wood shop so our father could watch Notre Dame games. Our mother gave away the kittens, and the cat was squashed by a car, and I don't know what happened to the pillow. I am pretty sure that pillow is long gone from this world. But my grandmother is not gone, not entirely, as you see.

FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIPS

CHILDHOOD

BRIAN DOYLE

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ESSAYS, MEMOIRS, & TRUE STORIES

Memorial Day

BY BRIAN DOYLE • JUNE 2016

We are at a parade. It is Memorial Day. I am sitting on the curb in front of the church with my brother, reserving our family's spot. The rest of the family is coming along slowly, our father carrying the baby, but my brother and I have run ahead because we don't want to miss a single soldier in uniform or girl twirling a baton or bespectacled beaming cherubic man wearing a fez. We might see an elephant. We will see horses and firetrucks. We will see politicians in convertibles. We will see men older than our dad wearing their Army uniforms. Army is green and the others are blue. Our dad will not walk in the parade wearing his uniform. He declines politely every year when he is asked. He says he no longer has his uniform. He says he does not know where it went, although we think he does know where it went. He says he wore it only because the job had to be done, and now that the war is over, there is no reason to have a uniform. He says uniforms are dangerous statements, if you think about it. He says uniforms can easily confer false authority, and encourage hollow bravado, and augment unfortunate inclinations, and exacerbate violent predilections. This is how he talks. He says uniforms are public pronouncements, like

parades, and we should be careful about what we say in public. He says we should be leery of men marching in uniforms. He says no one has more respect for members of the armed forces than he does, but that it would be a better world if no one ever had to take up arms, and that is a fact. He says in his experience it is the man who has been in a war who understands that war is cruel and foolish and sinful, and anyone who defends war as natural to the human condition is a person of stunted imagination. He says a study of history shows not only that we are a savage species but that we are a species capable of extraordinary imaginative leaps. He says that someday we might devise ways to *outwit* violence, as Mr. Mohandas Gandhi tried to do. He says most wars, maybe all wars, are about money in the end, and that when we hear the beating of war drums, we should suspect that it is really a call for market expansion. He says war is a virus and imagination is the cure.

Our father does not have his uniform anymore, but he does have a wooden box in a drawer in his bureau at home. There are medals and service bars and ribbons in the box. We have secretly opened the box, my brother and I, and handled its contents, and put them back exactly the way we found them, so that he would not know, but he knows. His photographs are in another drawer. In them he is tall and thin and shockingly young. He is a private, a sergeant, a lieutenant. He is on Bougainville Island in the South Pacific. Then he is in the Philippines. He is preparing for the invasion of Japan. He is preparing to die.

Today he is standing next to us at the Memorial Day parade as the soldiers and sailors pass by. Some men in the crowd salute, but he does not. He keeps his eyes locked on the soldiers, though, even as we are pulling at his hands and pant legs and the baby is crying and wriggling. The one time he hands off the baby and applauds quietly is when the firemen pass by in their trucks. After the firemen come the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and the Little League baseball players, and the Knights of Columbus, and the Rotary Club, and finally a visiting fife-and-drum corps from Ireland, and then we walk home, our dad carrying the baby, who fell asleep just after the Girl Scouts walked by.

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BRIAN DOYLE

ESSAYS, MEMOIRS, & TRUE STORIES

The Sudden City

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BY BRIAN DOYLE • APRIL 2014

My wry and remarkable sister, who had been through the three days of mud and drugs and magic and heart sad music at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair of 1969, drove me the next