

Surviving the Mustard Lid Days
by Meredith Dash

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

—Max Ehrmann

The furthest back that I can recall a memory so clearly was when my mom abandoned my brothers and me with a babysitter while my dad was away at law school. I remember the roughness of the russet oversized sofa against the underside of my legs, as I sat quietly in hope that my mom would reconsider leaving us to go to work that day. There was a stale smell of macaroni that hung just above me, and matte silver pots with dried cheese that had spilled down the side, sitting upon the stovetop as proof. The walls were marred by black markings from furniture being pushed against them one too many times, and a pressure from them closing in on me began as my mom released her hand from the outer doorknob. Her hand never returned to the knob again, but I waited for days until I was certain.

A whirlwind of events then consumed the following few years. To describe any one thoroughly would be impossible, although I have managed to piece together fragments of many to form my idea of what I now call my childhood. I remember how after my mom left us, my dad felt the need to be both parents to my brother Aaron and me. He would take me to after-school dance classes and be the only dad there who would join in dancing. I remember the rush of excitement I felt waiting for him to come home from work every day to play with me. He was my only real friend then. We would play games outside until the sky fell dark, and then we'd read Shel Silverstein each night until my eyes fell heavy. I had trouble making friends, but never really felt the need to because I found everything I needed in him. In these distant memories, feelings are vivid; however, most images seem distorted, as if viewing them through a glass of water, due to overabundance. But there are always those knots of memory, where at the time, all of your senses seem to peak, as though understanding the significance of the situation. This is when we recall things in high resolution. We can touch the memory, taste its sweet or repugnant flavor, and smell any scent that was present.

On January 30, 1998, I captured one of these memories. That Friday night, I can say, is more vivid than the tangibility of my pen to paper in present day. The phone rang as Aaron and I sat on the two maroon swivel chairs in the family room of my grandparents' house, waiting for my dad so we could start dinner. As the phone silenced, a shout from my uncle upstairs quickly filled the void, sending hair-raising chills throughout me. The words, "your dad died," caused my heart to explode upon impact, scattering minute fragments across the carpet. I was only ten, and I had just lost my best friend. At that moment, I too died.

It took a while; however, my rebirth began while living thereafter with my paternal grandparents and brother Aaron (my two half-brothers were living with my other grandparents). At that point, people looked at Aaron and me, and for the first time, no one knew what to say. What does one say? There was nothing to be said, because at that moment we were numb, with time pacing nervously a few steps behind, and our minds like open canvases, eager for paint to be splattered into some coherent pattern. For a while, it had felt as if I was plastered onto the backdrop of the Salvador Dali image "Persistence of Memory," waiting for the day the tired clock would cease

its circulations. However, this day never surfaced because I eventually began coming to terms with my situation, picking up pieces of my heart one by one.

After the several unreturned letters written to my dad and G-d, the actualization set in that I would be living with my grandparents for good. "This sucks!" I agonized. "They're just so...old!" They would cringe at my disgust because no way were they ready to accept their age as a handicap, and they proved this to me. Aaron and I gave them hell, and they "killed us with kindness." We became comfortable with taking our anger out on them because we knew that they would always be there after our one-hour punishment to teach us (or them) a lesson, understand, and start over on an unblemished page. They showed us they were willing to be the verbal punching bags to two hurt children, if it meant they could earn our trust and convince us they were sticking around. My grandparents' sincerity soon made us realize our guilt for acting like that, and in turn, we learned how to treat people. Even when we felt abandoned by the two people closest to us, *they* still cared.

To be the only one I knew without a dad or mom was heart wrenching, but it was reinforced when casually asked by others, "Are your parents coming?" or "Did you ask your mom?" A sting of resentment would boil my blood, leaving me only able to lie and nod. And for those who knew my situation, I was embarrassed when they would ask how my grandparents were. Even though "More than 2.4 million grandparents across the nation [raise] their grandchildren on their own" (Rey, par. 4), I still felt separated from "normal" kids. I felt weird when my grandpop would come to my soccer games instead of my dad, or when I had to explain to my grandmom that it was "cool" to wear skin-tight jeans with bell-bottoms in middle school. Other mothers just seemed to understand an issue like that. It wasn't fair. Not only was I bothered and upset over simple materialistic issues, I also craved the bond between mother and daughter and missed the close relationship I had with my dad; my grandparents were a generation behind and had already shared that bond with their own children.

However, this generation gap didn't mean that they couldn't take the opportunity to impress lasting values upon me. For as long as I can remember, my grandparents had set the highest bar for morals, and there was no jumping over it. There was no signing notes to get me out of gym, no calling up school saying I was sick, and no lying about my age even if it did get us a discount at a restaurant. "*Come* on, no one's ever gonna find out!" I would whine. It was true: Most lies, if followed through with, would have only been trivial, but my grandparents reinforced the importance of honesty, even if it was an inconsequential matter. I learned at a young age how meaningful integrity (along with other values) was to them, and these values, inevitably, became permanently fused into my character.

For the next few years I just seemed to exist. But it didn't sit right with me that I never really experienced feelings of sadness or depression. I felt nothing, empty. My feelings still hadn't surfaced fully, and it was explained to me that I was experiencing something similar to post-traumatic stress disorder like a soldier after war. During war the soldier runs, climbing over lifeless bodies of friends and comrades, but taking no time to mourn, because of the need to make it quickly to the next shelter for survival. After the war, the soldier is numb until he is unconsciously sure he is safe from harm; he then feels pain surface and can put his experience into words and actions, talking about it and accepting it.

I soon wrestled with my emotions until they seized me by my shirt, glued my fingers to a pen, and forced me to make it bleed across the virgin pages of my notebook. Nonsensical thoughts that

were tangled between my ears soon became lucid, as words formed curvatures and danced like a sinuous body beneath my pen. This urge to write occurred every time I felt something that I had the need to free myself of. Unknowingly, I practiced what English teacher Scott D. Feifer has traveled to shelters, treatment centers for drug and alcohol addictions, and prisons preaching. He has explained to many how writing can be therapeutic because of the “deep need for people to tell their stories – to be heard...There is [just] something about writing it down and claiming it as a part of [y]our past” (qtd. in Harris, par. 4). This therapeutic ritual kept my mind keen and my eyes focused. I finally began to really take a look at myself, and knew in turn that I wanted to learn more about what others had to offer. At that moment, the wall I secured myself behind imploded around me.

Like psychotherapist Jane Katims says, “Writing is a wonderful way to discover things...If you let yourself write openly, it’ll take you places you’ve never imagined” (qtd. in Fain, par. 16). I cried. I talked. I gathered pieces of my heart off the ground, and this time began piecing them back together. I entered forbidden corners of my mind, shining light directly into the eyes of my fears, while raising the surround sound to maximum volume, forcing myself to listen to their explanations. In order to reach the purest depth of self-understanding, I had to meet face-to-face with all that I had confined so long to darkness. *What have I feared so deeply that the intensity had forced me into becoming numb?* I feared being questioned, being exposed, being vulnerable. I feared my circumstances would stunt the growth of my success, that it controlled my worth and set limits on my capabilities. But after magnifying these concerns, only to see several holes and faults, I recognized how I had been holding on. It was the past. It wasn’t meant to be used as a crutch, or even forgotten, but rather to be used as a springboard to further growth and challenge me to better myself. I felt *powerful!* People began asking me how I stayed so strong, and after several shoulder shrugs, I realized that somewhere along the way I gained a sense that nothing could ever penetrate me as deeply as the initial blow that left me winded: I could now get through anything.

Still, I *was* young, and you know what that means: I was selfish. I took my grandparents for granted. I may not have had parents that allowed me to stay up late or let me go to a boy’s house without calling to see if his parents were home (like my best friend’s parents), but I did have grandparents who always questioned where we were going; who always wanted us to sit down and eat dinner together even if it meant calling us at a friend’s house (which was extremely embarrassing) to tell us to be ready in ten minutes because they were coming to get us; who made us drink four glasses of milk a day; who insisted we go to the bathroom before we left the house anytime (“You never know, you may get stuck in traffic.”); and who always said to have another person go with us if we were out somewhere. I had a grandpop who would entertain us by sticking mustard lids to his head at dinnertime (because of a metal disk implanted to aid his hearing); who would do a dance called “The Me-Wacka-Doo” at socially awkward times; who always choked on something during dinner because he *had* to talk with food in his mouth; who could never stand up without crumbs falling off his shirt; who sang senseless words in a high-pitched voice whenever he went to the bathroom or walked down the stairs...or waited for his bagel to be toasted. Then, I had a grandmom who dealt with these oddities, always with a smile; who tried to match her husband’s humor with her revolving door impression; who once sewed her needlepoint to her pants; who taught us to smile while talking on the phone because the other person can hear it in your voice; who can lay her head on her pillow at night without any regrets; and who has been a target for our

emotions and the rock of our family. Above all, she was a true survivor. I had never felt the impact of these simple, yet important, moments until lately, when the aftershock began resonating in my bones. I truly doubt my (sane) survival if it weren't for my grandparents' positive influence and persistence for happiness.

It recently occurred to me that trying to get around my situation was like forcing my body against the current of the ocean. When I gradually began to change my direction and float with the current I was able to view all of the materials floating alongside of me, learning about their substances with an understanding that they just "are." I would frequently wonder what things would be like if my life continued along the path that it had started. I thought about what my knowledge of and attitude toward life would be if I hadn't experienced a rebirth; if my morals would be so steadfast or my values so ingrained; if I would be so sensitive to matters or have a reason to be passionate about writing; if I would put as much faith in people or have the same meaning for trust; if I would have the same proclivity to be honest or the idea that all knowledge is useful; if I would be as loyal or have the same craving to learn something from every new person I meet. I question if I would like who I was, had I not been raised upon my grandparents' old-fashioned values. And I question the potency of personal choice in fate.

My curiosity always asked "What if?" Yet, all situations seem to be "what ifs" in some sense, for everything can be confounding if we consider "what is" versus "what could have been." Maybe I could have been in a "normal" family, raised by a mother and father, and maybe I wouldn't have a story worth sharing; maybe I wouldn't have known to challenge the parts of myself I was dissatisfied with, but maybe then I would have never reached the self-understanding that I have today. I will never know if I would have truly found myself by any other means. I will never know anything other than what I have experienced. However, what I am certain of is that, while it's taken me time to embrace this difference, the scars I have to bear and the people who served as my backbone are what have shaped me into the only person I would have ever wanted to become.

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