

FEAST OF LOSSES

By Shavawn M. Berry

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How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses? – Layers, Stanley Kunitz

This morning before it was light, I dreamt of doctors cracking open my father's chest. Candies and small presents poured out of his chest cavity: bits of ribbon, party favors, birthday hats... As I swam between sleeping and waking, the raw gash there flashed images like those from a yellowing newsreel: letters sent home from the South Pacific, a worn army helmet, a velvet bag of Japanese coins, the souvenir hula dancer — swiveling her hips and beckoning all passersby...



Wallace E. Berry, 1944

* * *

My head buzzes and reels. I see it all: Daddy's breastbone sawed straight through, his rib cage cranked open wide. Surgeons open his heart, gingerly touching his soft flesh and the arteries running wildly through it. Quadruple bypass. Those words slide around on my tongue. I watch and I wonder what they will find inside his interior ventricles and anterior veins. My blood type is there — along with the spinning helixes of our family's DNA. I imagine it is possible to see the genetics for the space between my front teeth. He has that same space. But what else is there? Are there emotional clots and calcifications? What of Daddy's three divorces, his service to his country in the muddy, fetid jungles of the Philippines and Korea? Is there any truth to his belief that he has been the constant recipient of the short shrift? Can doctors simply ream out the muck

inside the man and make him whole? What else might be hidden under my father's damaged heart? Perhaps "Curious Mike," his tattered, well-loved sock monkey is sleeping there.

* * *

I awaken, shaking off the spiderlike filaments of my own strange dream. I am sitting in a chair inside my father's room in the ICU. His death seems impossible to confront or comprehend. This is the man that carried me on his shoulders when I was

three. His voice still whispers to me, “Hey, little lady! I love that tiger on your dress!” Time falls away. My mother has dressed me in a black and white striped sundress with a tiger appliquéd to the front. The traffic on “A” Street slows as we cross. The sun is fading in a pale mackerel sky. I can smell the freshly cut grass in front of the house. My father’s breath is warm as he exhales a trail of blue smoke from his Pall Mall cigarette and softly pats my thigh. He is holding me. I can feel his fingers, solid around both of my thin legs. I run my hands along the soft, flat ridge of his haircut.

My daddy is that man, the one with the coal-colored hair, cut into a well-groomed flattop. I don’t recognize this rummy old man in a hospital gown. My father’s heart is not diseased. He cannot be this man in a diaper, drowsing between life and death, tubes helping him pee, helping him breathe, and holding him here, tethered to the earth, as if by a silken thread.

* * *

Two nights ago, while I was still in LA, Daddy called me from an ambulance. I imagined the red light spinning on the ambulance top, the paramedics frantically strapping Daddy onto a gurney.

“Lady?” he whispered, using my childhood nickname.

“Daddy, what’s going on?”

“Well, I started to feel funny, so I called the paramedics. They say that my heart don’t sound too good.”

“Where are you?”

“In the parking lot at Denny’s in Federal Way,” he said. “I was eating dinner and I felt dizzy, and then I came out and sat in the car for a while, but I didn’t think I could drive. So I called 9-1-1, and you wouldn’t believe how fast these young bucks got here! Lickety-split and here they were,” he wheezed.

“Where are they taking you?” I asked, grabbing a pen.

“To the hospital in Federal Way...or Tacoma...or Seattle, maybe.”

The call’s reception got funky, and he dropped his phone.

“The EMT says I have to go now.” I could hear the EMTs talking to him. Their radio dispatcher was relaying another address and location.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, honey. This is just a bump in the road. I am sure I’ll go to the ER and the doctors will fix me right up,” he told me, trying to sound cheery. “I’ll call you as soon as I get to the hosp...” The line went dead.

I called both of my brothers and asked them if either one of them knew Daddy was on his way to the hospital.

“Nope,” Craig answered numbly.

“That’s news to me,” Kirk commented. Daddy’s relationship with my brothers was edgy and distant on a good day.

As usual, Daddy called me – even though I lived the farthest distance from him.

“Can you find out where he is? He mentioned Tacoma, Seattle, and Federal Way when he talked to me from the ambulance.”

“Sure, I’ll call around,” Kirk offered.

“I’ll book a flight and be there by tomorrow.”

* * *

I got on a plane at LAX that night and took the red-eye to Seattle, drinking Heinekens the whole way, wondering if I’d have to order a funeral wreath as soon as I arrived.

In fact, I lived through my father's funeral over and over for the whole flight. I saw the casket, the flames of the crematorium, and the garish flowers arranged in the little chapel where he would be eulogized. I saw him lying, waxy and lifeless, wearing his best suit, inside a fabric-lined casket. I listened to everything everyone he had ever known had to say about him. They told funny and sad stories, talking ceaselessly about what a good guy my dad was. I was in a fun house at a country fair as that plane flew through clouds and turbulence, jolts and bumps, heading toward touchdown on the tarmac at SeaTac airport. Riding through the darkness, ghoulish thoughts jumped out at me every chance they got.

* * *

From my vantage point in Daddy's room, I can see Judge Judy moving across a muted television screen in the waiting room. A heart monitor beeps softly at the head of the bed. I stare, first at my father, then out the bay window, surveying the slick tar paper roof on the building just next door to Swedish Hospital. The sky in Seattle is sleet gray, and rain is falling. Much of my dad's late life has been spent in hospitals handling his heart attacks, broken bones, complications from diabetes, vascular surgeries, and dozens of small strokes, striking like veins of purple lightning in his brain. He's had a litany of close calls. In the past two years, he's been hospitalized for a bleeding ulcer, several strokes, infections in his legs and feet, and cancer of the urethra.

Beside him, an oxygen pump wheezes and whirs. On the bedside table, a bedpan holds Daddy's watch, keys, his clip-on pen and pocket protector, and several pennies and a dime: the minutia of his life. An ICU nurse comes in to check his vitals.

"How you doin', hon?" she asks me, adjusting her tropical print smock, then reaching to check the IV fluid and the tubing that attaches it to my dad's hand. Spotted and veined, nails buffed, cuticles pushed back to reveal half moons at the base of each nail, Daddy's hands are splayed out, unmoving against the sheets on his bed.

"OK, I guess," I say, looking at the tile floor, examining its pattern.

"Believe it or not, he's doin' good! I know it may not seem that way now, but considerin' what he's been through, he's come through like a trooper!"

She walks around the raised hospital bed, tightening the rumpled sheets, tucking them in where they are loose. Her hands expertly handle shifting his position. She pushes his pear-shaped torso up and smooths the sheet. Daddy's stomach is bloated from what the doctors tell me is kidney failure. He continues to sleep off three rounds of anesthesia. He bled out twice after surgery and had to go back in to the O.R. to find out why he was hemorrhaging. Against the pile of pillows, his full face, double chin peppered with silver stubble, looks unbelievably sad. His white hair includes a tiny braid, almost hidden at the base of his neck. He shifts in his bed, brown-black eyes fluttering open momentarily, irises cloudy. Then he is gone again.

* * *

My father is 75 years old. He has lived through four marriages and three divorces, the births of four children, including my sister, Roxanne, who died when she was 18 days old, and through the deaths of both his parents. Perhaps his heart failure has its genesis in all these events. I view my father, lying in state in his hospital bed, through what feels like an emotional telescope. He is a man floating in a space suit high above the earth's atmosphere, dialing in to my life from 25 miles up.

* * *

As a kid, my dad was always getting into hot water. He ran away from home at least a dozen times before he was a teenager. Dyslexic and nearly blind, my dad missed the first two years of his education because he couldn't see the blackboard. The nuns at his school told his parents he was rebellious and, perhaps, not very bright. In fact, he couldn't read because he couldn't see anything but the hazy outlines of those he was sitting very close to. At a distance, he couldn't see at all. His parents were finally informed of his poor eyesight when he was eight. At that time, they took him to see a specialist at the University of Washington.

The doctors who examined my father told them, "Wally not only cannot see, but when he does see letters and pictures, his brain is unable to decipher them. It flips them over and reads them backward. The condition is known as dyslexia. It is treatable. But we will need to send him to special classes to retrain his brain to see things the right way."

His mother felt as though she'd been slapped.

"Are you saying he's stupid?" she asked, incredulous.

"No! Not at all, Mrs. Berry! Wallace is a normal child in every way except in how his brain processes information. He just needs a little help."

She looked at her husband and shook her head.

"What Wally needs is discipline. He is a very bad boy, very rebellious...sometimes things he does seem, well, frankly," she pushed a loose tendril of hair back behind her ear, "spiteful." Daddy's father looked gravely out the window of the doctor's office. "Why, just last week he made our next-door neighbor, Fritz, just furious by painting his best friend, Manfred, purple."

The doctor looked perplexed.

Daddy's father tried to explain. "Wallace got into a spot of trouble last week, Doctor. He found some old paint in our basement—we were using it to seal the walls in the basement to keep them from getting damp—and he somehow came up with the cockamamie idea that he should paint Manfred!" He laughed nervously. "That day I was walking back from the shipyard after work with Fritz—Manfred's father—and we see this purple kid streak by us, laughing like the devil." He paused for a moment and then continued. "And right behind him comes Wally—laughing hysterically—like it is the funniest damn thing in the world."

The doctor started to chuckle. "Purple, huh? The kid does have a sense of humor!"

My grandmother sat up in her chair. She steeled herself to his remark and through clenched teeth said, "Humor! He doesn't need a sense of humor! What he needs is to be tanned within an inch of his life! The kid he painted nearly died! It was oil-based paint. The only parts of his body Wally didn't cover were the soles of his feet and his privates." She blushed deeply. "No. No special treatment for Wally. No sending him to special school. I think the priest at St. Mark's will know just how to handle this!" She tucked her handkerchief into her black handbag and stood up. Daddy's father leapt from his chair next to her and took her arm.

Evidently the meeting with the doctor was over.

* * *

Daddy finished his education—as it was—at St. Mark's Catholic School in Bremerton, Washington. He was never given any special help to learn to read, and he didn't finish high school. Instead, he joined the army at 17 and shipped out to the South

Pacific. The battleship he was stationed on was headed for Okinawa when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“What happened to you during the war,” I asked him once. His eyes clouded over. He looked at the floor, examined his hands, his feet, both mottled and spotted with age.

“I don’t talk about the war,” he said quietly.

“Why not?”

“Let’s just say I did a lot of things I am not proud of, and leave it at that.”

* * *

Daddy is 45 years older than his Filipino wife. She is eleven years younger than I am. Mentioning this fact causes men to grow giddy with admiration. Typically they slap him appreciatively on the back, winking at his lottery winnings. Women, on the other hand, look at me with a mixture of horror and sympathy. I consider his child-bride, Linda, to be nothing but an opportunist. My dad is a walking checkbook to her. Nineteen years old when they met, Linda worked as a maid for a friend of my father’s in Manila. She was making 25 bucks a month, enslaved to her mop, broom, and dustpan. I sympathize with her desire to escape the poverty of the slums of Manila, but I cannot condone the way she has sliced and diced my father’s affections. Although she married my father over a decade ago, just after she turned 20, she has continual affairs with younger men. She’s even given birth to two daughters and two sons, the offspring of all that sleeping around.

My father, of course, denies this. He claims her children as his own—but I know the truth. Daddy had a vasectomy at 50. Therefore, he could not father any children, unless Linda is a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. Her excuse for her infidelity is that Daddy leaves her alone in the Philippines for months at a time. She whines that he cannot get her a visa to come to the United States; however, I know if she ever did manage to get onto a plane bound for Seattle, she would be singing a rousing rendition of that old country tune, D-I-V-O-R-C-E, as soon as she had landed any sort of job.

* * *

Daddy has always been in love with love. He has married successively younger and younger women—starting out with my mother, whom he married when she was just a sprite of 19. He was 28. Their marriage crumbled 23 years later because, at 50, he had an affair with a woman of 22 who ran the answering service he used for his job at Pitney Bowes. That relationship ended before my parents’ divorce was finalized. Daddy rallied and strolled through a number of other flings before meeting Frederica—or Freddie as she was known by virtually everyone. Freddie was a widow. A tiny ginger-colored Filipino woman, Freddie had six children and a tract house in South Seattle. At 45, she was the oldest of Daddy’s women. They started dating in 1981.

Daddy made his first trip back to the Philippines after the war with Freddie. What I didn’t know at the time was that on that trip my father had married Freddie’s 17-year-old cousin, Lena, to help her gain entry to the United States. Daddy wasn’t much of an altruist, so Freddie’s family probably sweetened the deal with a large sum of cash. Still, Lena wasn’t given an exit visa when she tried to leave Manila with Daddy and Freddie—and consciously or unconsciously—Daddy forgot about her. He never even bothered to divorce her. Instead, he and Freddie moved to Maui, and they got married in January of 1985.

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My father spent most of the next 15 years married to two different women at the same time. First it was Lena and Freddie until 1989; then Freddie asked for a divorce. After that, for about a year, Daddy was only married to Lena. He went back to the Philippines in 1990. He wrote to me and told me that he “wanted to go find [himself] a wife.” That’s where he met Linda. They got married in September of 1991.

Things get hazy after that – but my father did eventually discover that he would need to divorce Lena in order to have any hope of transporting Linda to the U.S. He divorced Lena in 1998 and then remarried Linda.

Linda, Lena, Freddie, and my mother: Daddy’s women start to blend together in a smear of color, one after another, the same but different—kick, ball change, turn, dip... He danced as fast as he could. He was on a merry-go-round, and he kept changing horses in the middle of the ride.

* * *

I thought about all these things—that day after my dad’s bypass surgery. He walked the thread between life and death, and I passed the time floating in a brine of past events, carefully vaulting between my need for a father and my desire for my father to no longer suffer.

It turned out that Daddy came through the surgery despite the odds against it. His doctor had given him a 30% survival rate, but he bounced back. A few days later, I returned to Los Angeles. Still, I felt uneasy, so I made plans to permanently return to the Northwest. I was sure that the time my dad had left was limited.

* * *

I was right.

Daddy had a bit more than a year after that final surgery.

What did he do with his time?

He borrowed some money from Freddie’s sister, Mia, and he went back to Linda and her kids in the Philippines. Yep. Just five weeks after I took a teaching job in Washington State in order to be near him, he left the country for seven months. As October passed into November, and then Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Eve, I began to wonder if I would ever see my father alive again.

* * *

Daddy found his way back to my doorstep in mid-February of 2003. I opened the door, and there he was — shaggy, matted old dog, world-weary and tired. He had infections in his feet that took him to the hospital later that day, where he spent three days on antibiotics and an IV drip. When he got out, he drove his moldy Plymouth Sunrise up to my place.

I made a pot of coffee and sat down across from him while he drummed his fingers on the table.

“You’d like Linda,” he told me, fingers curling around a fresh cup of coffee. *I seriously doubt it*, I thought.

“I don’t know, Daddy.” Before I realized what was happening, he dialed her number on his cell phone and handed it to me after he greeted her. “Hello?” I said, trying to muster enthusiasm.

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“It’s so good to finally hear your voice,” she said. My eyes filled with tears. I hated this woman. I couldn’t believe I had been bamboozled into talking to her.

The conversation—which I frankly cannot remember—continued for a few more minutes. I handed the phone back to my father, and he ended the call.

“I want you to help me bring Linda and the kids to the U.S. I need someone to sponsor them. The INS says I cannot support them.”

“Well, can you?” I asked, pointedly.

“No. But Linda will get a job! I just need to get her out of the Philippines.”

I looked at him—his desperation, his sadness. Part of me wanted to help; but I knew that I couldn’t. “I’ll think about it, Daddy.”

* * *

Daddy spent the last month of his life—hours and hours—with me and my mother. My beautiful and mysterious mother, the woman whom he’d divorced 25 years earlier, sat and listened to his final prayer-like reminiscences, his stories about riding in jitneys through the filthy streets of Manila, about eating sweet meat soup for breakfast while he watched “his” kids play barefooted in the powdery dust outside the house he’d built for Linda in Dipolog City. While I was at the community college teaching during the day, Daddy was regaling my mother with one story after another.

I marvel at my mom’s strength and resolve—but she’d made her peace with Daddy during his first stroke, two years prior. She was the only person he knew in Bellingham then—and he was hospitalized at the hospital where she worked—so she visited his sickbed everyday. Their tumultuous 49-year relationship was the longest of her life. Daddy told her one day—as if it was an afterthought likely brought on by the morphine that he was taking for pain—that he’d never stopped loving her. She sat at his bedside while he looked deeply into her face and thanked her.

“Thank you for raising such great kids. It is completely a reflection of your effort as a mother that they turned out to be good human beings. I didn’t do a thing. For that I am sorry.”

My mom told me later that she had been waiting her entire life to hear him say that. All the bitterness of their split slowly evaporated. Her face softened and, to me, she became the most beautiful woman in the world, her long white and silver braid, twisted and pinned on top of her head, her gray-blue eyes surrounded by the lines of a life that has been well-lived. That truce between my parents carried them through Daddy’s final days.

* * *

The night before the war in Iraq started, my father died of a heart attack. A county sheriff drove into town to tell me. As his words of condolence swam through the air toward me, I had a vision of a bolt of fabric that makes up a life—yards and yards of stripes or colors, strands of silver and gold woven in—I saw it rolling out before me, reaching the end of the bolt, coming unpinned.

I could hear Daddy’s voice from the previous afternoon.

That last day, I got home late. My mother made sandwiches and coffee, and we all sat in the living room talking until it was starting to get dark. Daddy needed to drive home while he could still marginally see the road. He drank the last dregs of his coffee and pushed himself up using the table as a brace. He’d become more and more crippled since his return from Manila. He picked up his cane, and we linked arms. As I walked

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my father to his car, he leaned into me and whispered, “You always take such good care of me. You’ve been such a good daughter.” Tears sprang to my eyes. I helped him settle into the driver’s seat, and I closed the car door.

“I love you, Daddy,” I said, leaning in to kiss him good-bye.

“I love you, too,” he said, kissing me on the cheek. He started the car and went up to the corner to turn around. On his way back down the street, he tapped the horn and waved. That was it. That is the last image I have.

* * *

In the weeks and months following his death, I read my Dad’s letters, his insurance papers, and the raft of bills that fluttered into my mailbox, forwarded from the friend’s place where my father had been staying. There were photos of the kids in the Philippines. There was a life insurance policy that had lapsed. In it, my father left \$50,000 to Linda’s oldest boy. To my brothers and me, nothing.

His last months in the Philippines were not good. There was no joyous reunion between my father and Linda after his two-year respite. In fact, Daddy slept with the kids—on a mattress infested with fleas and mice. He’d written to a divorce attorney in Manila a month before he died. He’d also written Linda a nasty letter informing her of his plans to divorce her and cut her off financially. I found it tucked into the zippered bag where he kept his diabetic testing strips, Depend diapers, and alcohol wipes.

When my father died, he had 15 dollars to his name. By my calculations, after looking through his papers, he’d given Linda at least \$100,000 during the time he’d known her. Why would a man love such a woman? It made absolutely no sense. But as I sifted through the detritus of his life, I found one final clue.

During the war, Daddy had been stationed for quite a long time in the Philippines. I know he’d told my mother that it was the “happiest time of his life.” Sorting his photos from the war, there was one old black-and-white that stood out. In it, my father was wearing a tailored double-breasted suit and a panama hat. The hat was pulled down over one eye, and his arm was jauntily thrown over the shoulder of a lovely Filipino woman, dressed in high heels and a Sunday dress sprinkled with polka dots.

More than 60 years had passed since the photo was taken. I stared at the grainy image, the woman’s mouth curling into a broad smile, her lips painted scarlet. I felt sure that my father had loved this woman. I was also equally convinced that he, like many other soldiers during the Second World War, left this woman to fend for herself after the war.

My father’s obsession with Linda—with Filipino women in general—had always angered and confused me. I wondered why my father didn’t love me—or my brothers—the way he doted on those Filipino children. But, somehow, this mysterious photo helped me make sense of it. He paid penance to Linda to honor this other woman, this first flame of love he ever knew, this spark that glowed on his face in a yellowing photograph, without a name or date written on it.

* * *

I often think about my father’s early life—the way discipline trumped love in his home—the way that his quirky personality, his myopia, and his dyslexia shaped his terrible self-image. He viewed himself as stupid and damaged. He returned from WW II broken; already a ghost at the age of 20.

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Daddy never sought out any meaning for anything that happened to him. He wasn't religious. In his final letter to Linda, he was bitter. On paper he was still a 16-year-old boy whose girlfriend had betrayed him by screwing someone else. Yet, in the very same letter, he claimed to long for Linda's gaze, her tenderness, something she'd refused him for the last decade he was alive.

"Why don't you love me anymore?" he pleaded, writing one thing and crossing it out, replacing it with another, then another. In the end, I suppose he couldn't reconcile his losses.

* * *

My dad lived his whole life like a leaf, floating on the crest of a wave. He went wherever the water took him. He did what, I suppose, he thought people expected of him. When we threw his ashes over the side of my uncle's boat on what would have been my father's 77th birthday, I thought of how perfect a gesture it was, so befitting the man. Now, he could travel on the tides to every foreign shore that he'd ever called home. In what other way could we better remember him?

* * *

Although three years have passed since Daddy died, I still talk to him in my dreams. He shows up—in a weathered cowboy hat, his obligatory cigarette dangling from his lips, wearing Wrangler jeans and mismatched boots. He is the daddy of my childhood—the one with dark hair and flashing eyes—drinking beer in front of the house in Spokane. I lie in grass that is full of clover, bees pollinating the soft white pods blooming in the middle of the green clumps of leaves. Daddy smokes and talks to me about his day. The words are mundane. But I have learned to dig beneath the words, beneath the gray inflection, to discover what lurks under their surface. There is love buried under those ordinary words. I feel it.

"From this vantage point, I finally understand my life," he comments, chewing on a blade of grass. I feel my body sinking into the sweet clover I lie in. "I've made peace with it," he says, quietly, from the porch behind me.

"That's good, Daddy. I'm glad." My hand is splayed out over my heart, as a stone of grief lifts off of my chest.

Daddy's gone, but he's not gone. That's the irony. Every day when I examine my face in the mirror while I brush my teeth, he's right there staring back at me; he's right there, opening my heart to the inevitability of loss, to the risk associated with deep love, to gifts too numerous to name.