

What You Don't Know

Melody Warnick

A MAN OF MANY STORIES, my father left behind only a handful in the end. Primarily this is my fault; my mind long ago funneled such information into a vast reservoir of forgotten knowledge, where tales of my father's childhood in working-class Brockton, Massachusetts, swim in the same nameless stream as what I wore to school on the first day of kindergarten. The stories that remain with me have hung on by luck or sheer tenacity—the story of my father's first tricycle, for instance, stolen by neighborhood toughs when he was three or four. He was being raised by his maternal grandmother, Jennie Upham, then, in a house with a covey of spinster aunts whose names, I suppose, are written down somewhere.

In the makeshift chronology that I can construct for him, the tricycle story occurs first. Then comes his running away from home, his working as a soda jerk at the Manhattan YMCA, and his hitchhiking to California, where he once delivered a telegram to Mae West and shared a round of drinks at Dean Martin's house. At some point he married and raised two boys, then divorced, remarried, and raised two girls. I was in the second batch.

The last story of my father's life was one that he didn't tell me himself. Rather, I heard it from my mother, on a long-distance phone call from California, in October 1999. "Your dad had chest pains this morning, so they took him to the hospital," she said.

"Is he okay?"

"He died."

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He took everything with him when he went—all the stories I had forgotten, and all the stories I had never been told in the first place. Over time I have realized that there were more absences than presences in what he said, that there are strange and mysterious lacunae in my understanding of who my father was. A month after my dad died, my mother called to tell me that in her efforts to organize her financial affairs, she had discovered an account in my dad's name at a bank he and my mother never used. There was twenty thousand dollars in it. From the account's history, Mom could see that he had been withdrawing regularly. Shortly before he died, my father spent seventy-five dollars at a place called Alpaca Pete's, though nothing made of alpaca wool ever turned up at our house.

This particular breed of financial secrecy was unexpected. How do you squirrel away twenty thousand dollars without the knowledge of the woman who cashes your paychecks, pays the bills, and manages the vagaries of the family budget by refinancing liberally and often? On the phone telling me this, however, my mother sounded only mildly put out. She conjured an army of justifications for the account's existence: It was an East Coast thing, a child-of-the-Depression thing, a man thing, a "your father" thing. She thought it was perfectly reasonable for my father to want to have a bit of his own money, though she said this as if she were referring to a stash of quarters he used to buy Snickers bars from the vending machine at work.

But for me, the money confirmed what I had suspected for some time before he died: My father had been having an affair—perhaps several affairs, drawn out over the course of many years. It would not have been difficult for him. He kept an oddly truncated teaching schedule at the community college, taking on both early morning and late evening classes, so that he often left home before my sister, Heather, and I woke up and returned after we had gone to bed. Once I was still sleepless when he pulled into the driveway after midnight, and he let me go with him in my nightgown to the all-night grocery store for milk.

Teaching also meant that he kept company with an ever-renewing supply of eager, beautiful twenty-somethings, who threw their arms around him and planted loud kisses on his cheeks. As children my sister and I loved these women; they fussed over us at football games and fraternity meetings, gave us candy bars, and let us sit on the sidelines while they practiced their cheerleading routines. But I remember being wary of them, too, sensing instinctively that they posed a threat I could only guess

at. For several years when I was in elementary school, I believed that my dad was having an affair with Gina, a horsey, likeable woman who worked with Dad at the college. The word "affair" would have meant little to me then, signifying only the kind of bland kissing and emotionless ogling that passed for romance among my Barbies and Kens. But I was relieved when, a few years into my knowing her, she got married. I had been wrong all along. Of course, of course.

If there were indeed a mistress, she has remained meticulously anonymous, even after my father's death. No one has come forward to get it off her chest, or to demand money, or to offer protracted, weepy condolences. But I assume that she is out there with an alpaca rug draped over the back of her sofa. I think about this woman occasionally, wondering who she was to my father, and how they met. Was she my father's age or much younger? What was the attraction? What did my dad's sudden death of congestive heart failure mean to her? If I had thought of it sooner, I might have found her out, but my father's PalmPilot is long gone, and the hard drives of his computers were reformatted shortly after the funeral. She is a secret still, though I believe that she exists, and that she is in possession of the stories that I lack.

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My father, if you asked him, was a Presbyterian, and he believed in God and Jesus Christ, thank you, not that it was any of your business. He was not active in any church, however, and certainly not in ours, though he dutifully showed up in blazer and tie when Heather and I gave talks in sacrament meeting and received our Young Womanhood medallions. He sat down with the home teachers, if he happened to be around, and was never less than perfectly friendly with any of them. At the ward Christmas party one year, he played a red-faced, jovial Santa; a long line of children coiled out from his chair because he spent too much time admiring each one.

At some point my mother was told in a priesthood blessing that her husband would indeed join the Church, and this brought us all comfort, though even Mom couldn't say whether that meant the conversion would happen in this life or the next one. "A dry Mormon" is what we called him: Latter-day Saint in everything but baptism. When new sets of elders dropped by our house to get the back story on our part-member family, Mom always told them that it was just a matter of my father's will-

ingness to eke out the time to take the discussions, read the scriptures, and integrate church attendance into his life. He was simply too busy. One day he would slow down, and the gospel, panting after him, would finally catch up.

This is what we told ourselves, anyway. My sister and I put on doe-eyes and gave Dad wrapped and inscribed copies of the Book of Mormon for Christmas. "Please read it," we implored. "For me. For us." Even as a Primary child, I was sick of mentally having to exclude myself from lessons and omit myself from the songs. No, I could not seek a father's blessing. No, my family would not be together forever. I believed that, if I died, I would be cut loose, to float untethered from the whole human family for eternity.

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In summer 1997, I left on a mission to Puerto Rico while my sister was still serving in Lisbon. Our missions would overlap for six months, and there was something striking in this. Perhaps the combined power of our mutual sacrifice would extract some softness from our father, some blessing from God. Before I left I bought a copy of the discussions in English and cornered Dad at the table one evening, where he was grading term papers. "Can I practice my missionary discussions on you?"

He laughed. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?" I persisted.

"Because I love you, but I don't believe the same things that you do."

"Like what?"

"Well, Joseph Smith, for one." This had been one of his original sticking points. Having worked for most of his career with adolescents and post-adolescents, he found it inconceivable that any fourteen-year-old would be vessel enough for live transmissions from God.

"Have you ever read the Book of Mormon and prayed about it?" I asked.

"Sure."

"You have?" I was dubious.

"When your mother and I got married, I met with the missionaries for a while, and I read the Book of Mormon and prayed about it. But I just was never convinced. Can you understand that, Melody?"

"But think about this," I said. "I'm about to sacrifice a year and a

half of my life to teach this to other people. Do you think I'd be doing that if it weren't true?"

"I think that you think it's true," he said gently. "But there are plenty of other people in the world who have dedicated their lives to their religion. What about Mother Teresa? Or Buddhist monks? There are plenty of great Presbyterian people who believe in their religion just as strongly as you believe in yours."

Incredibly, this had never occurred to me before. And although the thought that my religion was just one of many inspiring total devotion around the globe did nothing to dissuade me from my belief in it, it was the first time I seriously doubted that, for my father, baptism was just a matter of time. He would not join the Church in this life, I remember thinking.

That summer before my mission, I was living at home, not working, just biding my time until July rolled around and I could enter the MTC. Dad, as always, was in and out of the house, maintaining his baffling schedule. Although classes hadn't started, he went to campus every day to attend meetings or sort files. I was used to not seeing him. What happened on a steamy morning in mid-June happened because, miraculously, we were in the same place at the same time, though it would have been better if neither of us had been there at all.

It was such a little thing—ridiculous almost. From the room next to my parents', where I was curled up studying Helaman 5, I overheard a phone conversation, or rather, the intimations of a conversation. I heard my father dial, then speak, but not in his normal hail-fellow-well-met phone voice. He was whispering. I could hear the susurrations, the playful upswing to his tone, but not the words. Uneasy, I listened in earnest, and finally made out something about meeting at 5:30, I couldn't hear where. And then Dad tipped the phone carefully into its cradle and creaked down the stairs, never knowing that I was in the next room listening.

My father had a lover. That was that. He had a lover and he was meeting her at 5:30. Such a strange conclusion, but then, I had suspected it at various points since childhood. I remember having a conversation with my sister just as I was starting my senior year of high school, and she was starting college: Why hadn't our parents divorced, we wondered. Their twenty-five-year marriage seemed an inevitability, as steady as the mountains, but there was a strained quality to it, too. They were, in their own words, "ships passing in the night."

There was more evidence. First, Dad had used an MCI calling card to make the call, which I discovered by pressing redial on the phone (with only a wink of moral compunction). But the family, my mom affirmed, didn't have an MCI calling card, just AT&T. I concluded that this was a measure to keep certain mysterious phone numbers from showing up on the monthly bill. Second, my father announced to my mother that he would be leaving shortly to go to campus to pick up his mail, and then he shut himself into the bathroom and emerged twenty minutes later in a haze of woody cologne. Who smelled that way to pick up mail?

One thing was clear to me: My parents would get a divorce. My faltering-but-functional set of parents would split up, and my father would slither off into whatever netherworld errant husbands inhabited. I envisioned the circles that would ripple out from the plashing of this single stone: the destruction of the family (how would we tell Heather?), the selling of the home where I spent my childhood, the awkward divvying-up of a lifetime of Thanksgivings and Christmases. I balled myself up in my bedroom and cried at the horror of it.

In the afternoon, I took my car into Carbon Canyon, to drive off the accumulating anger on ten miles of hairpin curves; but after an hour or so, I veered back and took the 95 freeway out to the college where my father worked. I had set an ultimatum of sorts. My father had said he would be in his office all afternoon, so I decided that I would check to see if his car was in the parking lot. If it was, I could discard the whole fretful afternoon as a misunderstanding. If the car wasn't there, I would know that he had lied. Feeling sick and shaky, I turned onto Alondra Boulevard and into the lot. The car was not there.

I drove straight home and told my mother what I had surmised, expecting that there would be tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth and the donning of sackcloth and ashes when I was through detailing my evidence. But she merely smiled and said, "You're right. It looks bad. When Dad gets home, I'll get to the bottom of it." Her calm was bewildering. Across the kitchen table from me, she cracked jokes and called me Harriet the Spy. When I asked her if she was surprised by anything I had told her, she said, "Not really. Once before I thought your dad was having an affair, but it turned out to be nothing."

When my father finally pulled into the driveway, I was in my bedroom, shaking with expectation. I could hear him and my mother talking in the kitchen below me, then laughing, of all things. A few minutes later

there was a tapping at the door. Dad entered, bent down to me, and pulled my hand to his chin, which was scuffed with stubble. "If I were meeting a lady friend," he said, "would I go like this?"

That was the crux of his defense: No man goes unshaven to meet a lover.

Eventually, in response to my skepticism, he produced more elaborate explanations. The call that morning had been to a colleague. The MCI calling card was issued by the college, to pay for business calls. He hadn't been at his office because he had had a meeting on the far side of campus. I stared at the floor as he talked; but when Dad finished and stooped for a conciliatory kiss, I leaned away. I could not be kissed by him. It was all too real to me and too hurtful to have my parents behave as if nothing had ever happened, though maybe theirs was the outsized cheerfulness of those who narrowly avoid disaster.

In my own way, I, too, was anxious to believe. That night I wrote in my journal, "I'm glad there's no affair and it's all normal, and yet I'm still weirded out. I just really need sleep is all." As if it had all been a hallucination, the product of a too-late night.

In the eighteen months of my mission, I sometimes thought about that day. I even occasionally told my Puerto Rican investigators about it, blurring the details in a mouthful of Spanish, only referring vaguely to a "really bad day." What I told them was what I didn't record in my journal—about finally reopening the Book of Mormon that afternoon to finish Helaman 5, the story of Nephi and his brother Lehi, who are imprisoned by an army of Lamanites for preaching the word of God. Their captors starve them for several days and finally remove them from their cells to kill them. But before they can, Lehi and Nephi are engulfed by flames that do not burn—a divine manifestation of God's love and protection. Crazy with fear and confusion, the Lamanites hear "a pleasant voice, as if it were a whisper, saying: Peace, peace be unto you, because of your faith in my Well Beloved, who was from the foundation of the world" (Hel. 5:46-47). Such a different kind of whisper than I had heard from my parents' bedroom and portending such a different thing. Because I needed it so desperately, I took myself to be the person on whom the Lord was urging peace.

After I returned from my mission, I spent a few months at home before I went back for a final semester of college. And one day, I overheard another odd conversation: my dad whispering, giggly, making a promise

to meet someone at the train station at 5:30, or at least that's what I heard. I wrestled with wanting to drive to the Fullerton train station, to see for myself that my father was an adulterer. I even worked out the logistics of it: I would go early, park in the lot, and hunker down in the back of my mother's Subaru station wagon to watch.

But the choice between knowing and not knowing was too frightening. I had already learned that what I didn't know could indeed hurt me; but the pain of uncertainty was nothing, I assumed, compared to the fruits of this particular tree of knowledge. I brooded that afternoon, and in the end I made my decision: I went to the mall with my mother.

Where my father went, I can never be entirely sure.

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My father must have known that he would end up a Mormon. It was the family joke: Why not do it now and save us all that trouble later? A year after his death, my mother, my sister, and I traded a flurry of long-distance phone calls to work out the details of his conversion. I was by then living in Maryland with my husband, Quinn; my mother and sister had sold the family home and moved into an apartment that they shared in Laguna Nigel. "Don't you want to be there when we baptize him?" Heather asked. "We've been waiting for this for a long time."

"It's okay. Just do it without me," I urged her. "When you and Mom come for Christmas, we'll do the endowment and the sealing here. I'm just worried that, if we wait, we won't be able to get it all done in one day."

And so in October 2000, one year after his death, my uncle Ken was proxy for the baptism and confirmation in the Los Angeles Temple. Two months later, on a bitter December morning in Kensington, Maryland, my mother, my sister, and I were endowed on behalf of women we didn't know—from Europe or America, I forget which—whose lives had never overlapped ours and whose stories we would never know. And my husband was endowed on behalf of my father, born May 22, 1941, Brockton, Massachusetts, died October 8, 1999, Fullerton, California.

After the endowment, we were guided to the top of the Washington DC Temple by Brother Windley, a white-haired temple sealer from our Maryland ward. He had us kneel on the velvet cushions around the sealing room altar and told my mother in a visionary tone, "You are marrying the right man." Using ritual words that I knew from my own temple mar-

riage, he sealed my parents to each other, and then my sister and me to them both.

My sister and mother were weeping, and I wept, too, to finally be a part of my own family, as legitimate in the eternities as a child born under the covenant. But there was something in me that held itself back. My hands refused to open to the miracle of the day. It was not, after all, wholly a triumph.

I have been taught to believe that vicarious temple ordinances deliver the saving graces of the gospel to the righteous dead who were deprived of it when they lived on earth but who, like Joseph Smith's brother Alvin, would have embraced it had they had the chance. Granted, righteousness and ignorance are vague parameters for posthumous salvation, but even with the most generous of definitions my father failed on both counts. His rejection of a baptism repeatedly offered was not ignorant and not, as my family believed, because he just lacked the time. It was well thought out, intractable under pressure. But then again, Mormonism wasn't his birthright, as it was for Mom and Heather and me, and who can account for the effects of personal history and a lifetime of cultivated disposition? Surely there is some forgiveness somewhere for those.

Righteousness is the stickier issue. My father, it is widely acknowledged, was a good man. He was a gifted teacher. He brought home stray dogs. He picked up hitchhikers. He stopped to help when he saw a car accident. He adored children. He entertained at our birthday parties by pulling red handkerchiefs from his thumb. He was the family peacemaker; once, when I stormed out of the house after a particularly livid fight with my mom, my father rode his bicycle through the dark streets calling for me. Much of what I know about personal Christianity—the part of the gospel that is not repentance or baptism or being the ward Sunday School teacher but is simply emulating the selflessness of Jesus Christ—I learned from my father.

But the stories I don't know are the ones that have taken hold of me so that, four years after his death, I'm still unsure how to handle his memory. I can't tell you whether my father was a good man or an evil one. Even his sweetness seems suspect to me now. I am not entirely sure where my father went after he died. If he went to spirit prison—a place I envision as a Leavenworth constructed entirely of wisps of cloud, guarded only by air and mortal guilt—was he sprung by our work on his behalf? Did we absolve

him, send his soul flying straight to the celestial kingdom? Or is he still in limbo somewhere, paying penance for sins long past?

I'm not sure if my mother and sister share my ambivalence, but we have almost stopped talking about Dad altogether. Holidays continue merrily without him. My daughter is growing up without him. My father's birthday in May passes without comment, though I've marked it on my calendar as a private memorial. In the past two years, both my mother and my sister were married, and I can't remember hearing my father mentioned at either wedding. Because we don't talk about him, I don't know where he stands in the others' memories—whether they have forgotten him, by accident or by design, or simply moved on, smoothing over his place in the family so thoroughly that only a slight tenderness indicates that he was ever there.

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After getting the call at 9:00 P.M. that my father had died, my brand-new husband drove us the ten hours home to California. Neither of us was familiar with the protocol of grief; and after eight hours, we were so punchy from lack of sleep that we cracked jokes and spat sunflower seeds to keep ourselves awake. But when we pulled into my cul-de-sac a little before dawn, the sight of my father's car—unwashed, loaded for work—closed my chest like a fist. I cried often that week and, almost as often, found that I was the only one crying. My mother and everyone else said that it was a blessing that he went suddenly, but I loved my father and found it hard to feel blessed.

Apparently it was only the force of his personality that kept us all attached to him. Now, even though we are sealed to him, we have spun off into new orbits and allowed the collective family memory of him to grow weaker. This saddens me when I remember him as a good man, a loving father. But when I think of him as a liar and an adulterer, I can only presume that such fading is a just end. Either way, I have lost him twice over, once in his death and once in my own not knowing. And because he is gone, the distance between us never closes.

One day, perhaps, my father's mistress will appear at my door with a legacy for me. She'll be silver-haired, hazy with age, but she'll press letters into my hands, or a ring, or a photograph that I have never seen before. Maybe she'll tell me, to provide some small comfort, that my father spoke often of me and that he loved me very much. She will deliver to me the sto-

ries that I lack and allow me the knowledge to make my own decisions about who my father was and where he is now. Until that happens, I must rely only on the stories I have—the stories my father gave to me.

This is one of them: Just two months before my father died, I married my husband in the San Diego Temple. Because my father couldn't, of course, enter the temple to see the wedding ceremony, we saved the exchanging of rings for that night, at the reception at the Fullerton Arboretum. Dad was so happy, I remember. With his chin bowed down over the bow tie of his rented tuxedo, he pronounced on Quinn and me an Irish blessing:

May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face
And rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

The memory of my father in that moment, pronouncing on me his own breed of blessing, has become one of the most beautiful stories I know about him. In time, it will perhaps become the story of him that I choose to remember, the only story I want to tell.