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Between Love and Denial

by Tabitha Metreger

(English 2253)

The Assignment: Write a 1500-word, creative nonfiction memoir essay in which you integrate the: description of a significant photo you appear in, a significant period in your life, one quote from a source important to your essay, and section headings.

My very first memory. A blurry, fuzzy border kind of memory. It's dark and I'm standing in the hallway, crying. Or am I rubbing the sleep out of my eyes? No, *I must* be crying because Mark comes out of his bedroom to console me. His face brings comfort, as I imagine it did many frightening nights before, but I cannot hear what he whispers in my ear to reassure me everything will be all right. And that's all there is: one fleeting flashback of an event I'm not entirely sure ever took place. It may simply be the imagination of a baby sister crying out for an intimacy with the brother about whom she can barely reminisce. My understanding of Mark – of the person my brother was – comes mainly from the drawings of superheroes, the baseball cards and the knickknacks he left behind as well as from the stories told by my family. He was pretending to be Spiderman, Martin divulges, the day our big brother climbed that damn electric pole behind the old Topps store. I – too young to remember him, yet memory is no prerequisite for love.

Some years later and the borders on my memories are not quite as fuzzy. Piggy-back rides, jaunts to the park, long walks on a far away beach to the lighthouse, car rides in search of a White Castle we never could find, Christmas eve trips to view the colorful light displays in Sauganash – and many recollections of adventures with dad. Then, one day, the phone rings. Dad's been in an accident and my mother rushes to the hospital. Images of him hobbling through the kitchen door on crutches cannot keep me from introducing cousin Jerry, our impromptu babysitter, to my complete collection of horses. Mom is gone for hours, the minutes ticking by in uncomfortable silence on the part of my older sisters, an excruciating quiet I fill by babbling off the names of my Palomino, Appaloosa, Clydesdale, Arabian, Pinto, and my favorite, the Tennessee Walking Horse. The silence, of course, is because my older sisters' fear what nobody wants to tell us. When my mother finally returns home, she is alone.

By the time I was eight, I had already lost both my brother and my father. My sanctuary of innocence and security had completely crumbled to pieces.

An Alien is Born

Sure, I *looked* like a normal kid, for America circa 1979 anyway. You know, back when kids still wore no-name hand-me-downs in three styles: plaid, plaid, and plaid; and parents doubled as barbers sending their poor offspring off to school looking like Moe from the *Three Stooges*. And if it weren't for my zigzag bangs, courtesy of my mother-slash-barber, I might even be considered a *cute* kid. So it's no wonder my secret was safe. I fretted over it needlessly. My fellow classmates didn't have a clue that I was not the ordinary average suburban third grader they thought I was, but an alien from another planet *masquerading* as an ordinary average suburban third grader. My mission? To gather intelligence on the workings of elementary school earthlings resembling Moe Howard.

I wasn't even aware of my little secret at first. Gradually, though, it became apparent to me that the thoughts in my brain were not the thoughts of your average eight year old. You see, Mrs. McCall was always criticizing my artwork. *So what* if I drew my Thanksgiving pilgrims with blood-

shot eyes – I figured they must have been very tired from working so hard. Or maybe there was more than tobacco in that peace pipe they borrowed from the Indians. It was also part of Mrs. McCall's daily lesson plan to remind Neal Moritz, "You're nothing but a bump on a log." And she most certainly played a part in that grand conspiracy to brainwash students by having them chant that damn pledge over and over again.

What is the *Pledge of Allegiance* if not a tool of indoctrination? Every school day, Mrs. McCall made me stand, hold my hand over my heart, and recite words that I could not comprehend. She forced me to profess blind allegiance to my country at a time in my life when, on rare occasion, I still peed my pants. Once, when I showed up on the playground in brown and white plaid polyester bell bottoms the school nurse had me change into (there was no escaping those ugly plaid pants), I feigned having fallen into a puddle. Though the playground was dry as the Mojave, my classmates actually bought this lame excuse. Why? Because children are a terribly trusting species! This is why we believed Mrs. McCall when she told us we must profess loyalty to our republic. I didn't even have a clue what a republic was. From the words of the pledge, I inferred that the republic is a thing that stands, which I figured is why we had to stand when pledging allegiance to it, but what made it invisible? If it was invisible, how could we tell it was standing? Nevertheless, recite it I did, day in and day out with scarcely a grumble of dissent, the whole time completely unaware that in 1943 the Supreme Court had ruled that I was *not required* to join in the chant. This was a significant step taken by the Court to preserve our liberty. Too bad Mrs. McCall forgot to tell us.

Eventually, I got fed up with the constant criticism, the name-calling, and the forced allegiance to a concept I couldn't comprehend. I felt it was high time my third-grade class rose up and revolted. Nothing short of a revolution was needed to take back our dignity, our self-esteem, our right to a longer recess. But my dreams of overthrowing the school principal and gaining control over the means of education were not to be. My classmates thought I was a weirdo, and the fear of being laughed at or called names can be a powerful tool of repression. The other students' words never matched the thoughts in my own head, so I was afraid to speak my mind.

The evidence soon became too overwhelming for me to deny. I could see no other explanation for my peculiar ideas except that I was undoubtedly a creature from another planet. My space culture was so advanced, I had determined, that every time I spoke, my words were automatically transmuted into the vocabulary of an ordinary average suburban third grade earthling. Time and time again, I worried that my words would come out sounding like gobbledygook to my classmates and they would find me out. They would discover that I was not one of them at all. Yet, somehow, I managed to make it through school without a single challenge to my identity as a human – albeit a rather strange one. I did not understand why I questioned things other third graders did not seem to question, but my little alien was born out of my perception that I was worlds apart from my peers.

The Alien Meets the Buddha

Despite these early years as an alien embedded in the frontline of elementary American scholastics, by junior high and high school, I found myself becoming dreadfully conformist. I succumbed to the culture of cool that I, like many teenagers before me, did extremely un-cool things to infiltrate (like kiss-up to kids who were too cool to even acknowledge my existence). Then, during an especially vulnerable time during my adolescence, I fell prey to some modern day Pharisees: a group of evangelicals who referred to themselves simply as "Christians" and who believed only *they* were worthy enough to use that name. My older sister had recently found God (never did find out where it was He had disappeared to) and finally convinced me that He was the answer to all my problems. So I repented, asked Jesus to come into my heart, and then condemned everyone else to hell.

In the end, after becoming disillusioned by the lack of sincerity in both camps of demoralizing coolness and hypocritical Christianity, I conformed to a group of non-conformists. Dyeing my hair various colors of the rainbow (when it was still shocking to parents), wearing ripped up clothes from Salvation Army, and delving into strange philosophies like Taoism, Wicca, and existentialism, I had become a teenage punk rocker. Disenchanted with school and church and dissatisfied with teen pop-culture wisdom that preached philosophies of materialism, vanity, and self-loathing, I sought something entirely different. And I found it in a circle of friends my mother wished I would not bring home.

My little alien was always searching – searching for a way to fit in. Still unable to trust my own convictions, I looked to others to validate my beliefs. The eighth grader who wore skin-tight animal prints, pretended to be sexually aware, and stole her mom’s Kents (referred to, of course, by a much more vulgar name, which was probably as much a commentary on the taste of the cigarettes as it was on some boys’ distaste for cunnilingus), was searching for a means of overcoming her profound sense of alienation. The Bible-thumper was hoping to discover a place of belonging that could also provide a path toward a more meaningful life.

Yet, what ultimately saved me was falling in with the punk rock crowd. While it was conformist in its own way, it also opened the door to new worlds of knowledge. It was like my reaction after watching Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* for the first time: “Whaaa? Huh? Hmmm. Woooooah!” It was an epiphany of cosmic sorts to discover that everything I had been taught as “truth” until that point was in fact only a fraction of the seemingly infinite possible truths out there waiting to be explored. Concepts of a higher power that did not involve some mean old man sitting on a throne, philosophies of thought that denied the very existence of a higher power, alternative realms of existence that my more mystical friends insisted they could tap into – it was all so new and fascinating to me. It was also the first time in my life I took an interest in the injustices of the world – some perpetrated by my own government. Allegations of CIA experimentation with LSD and involvement in drug trafficking, the Reagan-Bush campaign’s secret deal with Iran to hold the hostages until after the election, government support for the overthrow of democratically elected governments: these were all popular topics within my circle of misfit friends. What people saw was a girl with ratted fuchsia hair and black tattered clothing, now smoking the much tastier, but no less vulgar, Virginia Slims – and occasionally a bowl or two. That ostentatious exterior may have belied my future path, however, for it was this time in my life that kindled in me an insatiable thirst for knowledge that gradually pulled me out of my period of teenage self-absorption. My little alien rejoiced in finding this unconditionally accepting haven of freaks but was dismayed to discover, slowly emerging out of the darkness, her curious, inquisitive and conscientious arch nemesis – my little buddha.

The Alien vs. the Buddha

My sanctuary that collapsed after the loss of my brother and father never could be rebuilt. Instead, to this day, I constantly trip over its ruins. The wounds from these early traumas never properly healed, and they open up every time I see a fellow human being in anguish. That little girl who met darkness during the sunrise of her life still walks with me. And she won’t let me look away. Tugging at my sleeve, she says, “See this little girl who lost her father; see this family who has lost their son and brother. Remember how the heart aches when the wound is so fresh? We must *always* remember so that we can grieve with them and show them compassion.” This is the voice of my little buddha today.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen master and peace advocate, wrote, “To develop understanding, you have to practice looking at all living beings with the eyes of compassion. When you understand, you love. And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the

suffering of people.” The little buddha inside me is constantly tugging at my sleeve; she doesn’t want me to forget the suffering of people all over the world. Stuck in a global gaper’s block, I am compelled out of a sense of duty to this little girl to acknowledge the adversity on the shoulder of every road. It is quite a burden she has saddled me with, but to a little girl who has experienced heartache, the goal of humankind must always be a world where no one hurts.

There is much misery caused by injustice all over the world, and my inner buddha insists I educate myself on such matters: human trafficking, slave labor, sweatshop labor, child labor, conflict diamonds, assassinations of labor activists, environmental degradation at the hands of corporations, water privatization, drug companies putting profits before health, racial profiling, prisoners of conscience, the use of torture in over one hundred fifty countries, violence against women, forty-five million uninsured Americans and thirteen million children living below the poverty line in the wealthiest nation on earth. My little buddha reminds me that my own suffering pales in comparison to that of the poor in my own backyard and that the luxuries I enjoy as an American may be at the expense of the well-being of workers in the developing world.

And though my buddha wishes me to stay mindful, my little alien – still longing for acceptance – tries to deny all the suffering in the world and redirect my attention. My little buddha argues, “There really are only two paths in life: the path of truth and the path of diversion. Very few of us are disciplined enough to stick solely to the path of truth.” Most of us prefer the path of diversion, as does my little alien. But where, my little buddha nags, has thirty-odd years of television, crossword puzzles, shopping, meaningless sex, drinking, internet surfing, gossip, dope, the rat race, fashion, celebrity watching, obsessing, video games, countless advertisements, pointless phone conversations, fear-mongering newscasts and vanity gotten me? Underneath all this mental clutter lies the unforgettable love I have for my brother and father and the unbearable pain from losing them both so young. No matter how hard my alien tries to divert my attention, my little buddha always reminds me that such self-indulgence will distract me away from the path of truth and that only this path can lead to inner peace.

My inner alien always tries to smother my inner buddha. “All she ever does is nag, nag, nag,” whines the little alien. “You mustn’t offend, mustn’t talk of unpleasantries. Nothing to do about it anyway. Be polite, smile, how’s the weather outside? Besides, no one cares what you have to say.” She is aware of all my sore spots and she uses that knowledge to taunt me. She knows that by merely talking, I fear that I am an unwelcome intruder into people’s lives. From my mother’s rages that sent me scurrying under the sheets in terror, to my brothers’ tantrums whenever I became a nuisance, and my sisters’ attempts to mold me into their own image, I internalized the sense that *I* essentially don’t matter. I am someone no one wants to listen to with a message no one wants to hear. So I suppress this spark of injustice smoldering inside, begging, pleading, demanding to be ignited; I keep it buried in the bowels of my being for fear it will blaze up and reveal itself in the most inflammatory way.

The Apocalypse

The buddha, the alien, and I all attend a demonstration protesting the Iraq war. Kathy Kelly, a peace activist and three-time Nobel peace prize nominee, offers the closing remarks of the day. I am awed by the courage of this petite, soft-spoken woman who has been arrested more than sixty times for her cause; who was in Iraq the day the war started, protecting children, protesting, and handing out refreshments to our soldiers; and who, on this chilly, windy October day, has the nerve to suggest that we should listen to our enemies. My little buddha concurs, “she’s right: The only way to peace is through understanding.” My little alien remarks sheepishly, “God, I hope no one sees me here.” And I – I wish I could muster up just an ounce of Ms. Kelly’s courage.

If I did, I might tell people the stories of the veterans I know from working in the psychiatry department of the VA hospital. The Vietnam Veteran whose wife left him after he pulled a gun on

her during a flashback, who hears voices criticizing his every move, who wakes up howling and screaming in the middle of the night. The WWII vet still haunted by the burnt faces of the children from Hiroshima. The Gulf War vet whose government tries to deny the existence of his illness and who fears his children will be born with birth defects. The countless vets who suffer from loneliness, depression, chronic anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. And, if I had the courage, I might tell them about my first glimpse of a young vet just returning from Iraq. I would tell them how startling it was to see a patient younger than I – until now, a relatively uncommon occurrence at the VA hospital. He’s just a kid, I would tell them, the youngest amputee I have watched wheel himself down the hospital corridor. And I would tell them of the unexpected torrent of emotions that overcame me – how I had to choke back the tears and fight the urge to run up to him, throw my arms around him and tell him how sorry I am.

If I had the courage, I would explain to them that when a vet is admitted to the psychiatric ward, he is said to suffer from “ineffective coping skills.” And I would ask them, how do you cope after having endured the unendurable crimson annihilation of your friends and fellow soldiers? How do you cope with the understanding that sometimes “collateral damage” camouflages the carnage of women and children? How do you cope when you’ve been to hell and all anyone wants to hear is how the weather was down there? We label these courageous veterans mentally ill when the insanity truly lies in the inhumanity of people who deny the existence of suffering and who too easily resort to war in the name of peace.

But I tell no one these things. I tell no one that my early wounds have opened up and bleed for all the victims on both sides: the Iraqi civilians, our troops, the families of fallen soldiers. My heart bleeds for them and, yet, I cannot empathize with them – for my loved ones were lost to unfortunate accidents. All the love lost during this war, conversely, is the result of intentional, premeditated action. As a little girl, I felt I should not pledge allegiance to a government I was too young to understand. Now, I feel I cannot pledge allegiance to a government I have come to understand all too well.

“Shhhh,” my little alien scolds me, “don’t say that too loudly, people might hear you.” My little buddha, on the other hand, wants me to shout, “We must acknowledge the deep and lasting scars suffered by those who experience it firsthand before we can make an informed decision about the rationality of war.” And I – I continue the struggle somewhere between love and denial.