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The Letters

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O-Dark-Thirty

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The Letters

by vetswriting on 23 Apr 18

by Alicia DeFonzo

“You know, your grandmother only wrote me once during the war?” he says, sipping his scotch, staring out at the Chesapeake Bay which he can no longer see. I look at him with *her* eyes. It was the first I heard of it. He wouldn’t lie to me, but I wonder how this could be true.

“Really? Only once?” his second wife, Linda asks.

“It was the only letter I got from her the whole war. Rose sent her photo and told me how upset she was that they were sending Dominick, her brother, overseas.” I learned a while back Dominick was a nice guy, funny too, like my younger brother Tony. Liked to smoke and drink, same as Tony, but he died the year before I was born – cancer of the throat got him.

“They sent the guy to Paris!” Grandpop raises his voice with fists in the air. “I couldn’t believe that shit! The war in Europe was almost over, there was nothin’ going on there! Dominick spent most of his military career in California. How lucky does this guy get, and they’re worried about *him* and how bad *they* feel!”

My grandfather Del was gone for more than two years, from basic training to the end, sending her dozens of letters, French perfumes, and money to buy herself something nice. One reply. “All the other GIs received mail, even during the Bulge. No one ever sent me anything, not even my mother. Some guys got packages around Christmas time. Hell, Gus’s mom sent spaghetti and meatballs in a jar. We heated it up in our steel helmets, used them as pots, and cooked it over the fire. Man, it was good.”

He forces a smile and stares back at the restless water, folding his hands. I know he wants to say something but manages nothing. His eyes are watery. It still bothered him at 85-years-old, and it bothered me. One letter. I couldn’t believe her. Worse yet, I was mad at myself for having done the same to our youngest brother James after he deployed to Iraq. In 2006, TIME called Ramadi, “The Most Dangerous Place in Iraq,” where more Marines had died than any other territory.

Tony and I begged James not to join the Corps, an early recruit at age 16 — the hell with what Dad wanted. But off he went rather than suffer my father’s disappointment, which he witnessed Tony endure. In a few years, James was shipped out at 22-years-old, 6’2”, and 180 pounds solid. I wrote three, maybe four letters, couldn’t stomach the whole “last words” concept. “Everything is the same here...Dad’s still crazy...be safe.” Tony never wrote, though; that’s how he deals with things. Total denial. The two of us wore James’s dog tags around our necks while the family sent him care packages. We cursed anyone, anywhere who talked down our brother or made light of the war. If he died, Tony and I vowed never to speak to our father again. It was seven months of waiting for that phone call, which extended to ten.

James finally returned with burns and a concussion from a truck bomb, torn shoulder ligaments from months of carrying 80 pound gear, PTSD but grateful to be back and alive.

Tony and I threw a coming-home party for friends at the community clubhouse, after a few drinks, James’s demeanor shifted instantly. His dark blue eyes reflected the shadows of a lost boy, no longer James.

In front of everyone, he suddenly dragged Tony into the bathroom: “Not one letter the entire time. BROTHER! You piece of shit!” He threw Tony against the wall; it was eager, effortless.

I swiftly told those remaining to leave — “Now!” Our friends scattered.

Gripping his brother by the throat with one hand, James slammed the other next to Tony's head leaving a hole the size of a basketball. "NOT ONE LETTER?! I COULD BE DEAD!"

Brother apologized to brother, but it was too late.

James leaned in close and whispered: "I should snap your fucking neck."

That was the cue. I threw my body between them, begging James to stop, but he shoved me to the floor with his bloody palm.

"DO YOU FUCKING HEAR ME?! I HAVE NO BROTHER!"

Then James let go.

He stormed out of the clubhouse hurling objects in his path while Tony fell to his knees beside me and cried.

James has not forgotten the letters since. Neither has my grandfather.

After the letters conversation with Grandpop, I told my mother, who only then mentioned she preserved her father's letters to her mother. Mom kept all of them wrapped in a plastic bag inside a plastic box tucked away in the attic. She never read them. There were at least 50 envelopes to my grandmother, all stamped "Property of US government" and "Censored by" who cut out any info on locations or maneuvers in case the letters were captured. The pocket sized papers inside held a rusty yellow color with faded gray ink. All pretty much profess his love and fidelity.

Though he remembers differently, his own handwriting indicates she actually replied about four times and sent her picture twice, but not one of her letters can be found. I asked my grandfather the whereabouts of these papers, and he replied nonchalantly: "I threw them away somewhere in Belgium" – a month before his return to the States.

"Why would you do that?"

He claimed he could not recall, but for the first time, I felt he was lying.

Over 200 men in the company threw their names into a worn helmet. All had the chance to be granted a 15 day furlough to Italy, France, or England. It was the first offered since the Invasion. In April of 1945, the war in Europe was drawing to a close. GIs prayed for the lucky leave of absence, but only one name was drawn: Anthony DelRossi. Men immediately started bidding Del for the furlough, promising all their possessions, anything and more, name it. But Del just stood there, filthy, exhausted, stunned. He knew nothing in this life could ever be worth more than a reprieve from the front.

The next day, his leave began, and Del took the train to Paris. After arriving at the station, he was arrested a few blocks later because the top button on his uniform was undone, a regulation for any soldier in the city. The same day, he was tried in a small military courtroom where he raised hell: "I just got back from the front! How was I supposed to know this order? We saved your asses!" They threatened to court-martial him but instead he was released by morning.

Del went broke his first week in the City of Light and lived off his rations, though he had some chocolate to bargain with, a rarity during wartime. He stayed at the Red Cross, living on six dollars. The Army paid the average GI \$45 a month during the war, but the rest was sent home to his mother and Rose. On April 12, 1945, the innkeeper knocked, claiming important news. With tears in his eyes, he told Del that Roosevelt died, and Truman was now President. "What do I care?" Del replied.

The man walked off dumbfounded, and Del went back to sleep. He figured FDR was so far removed from the war and its troops. "There were people in our country that hated Roosevelt because of his lean towards communism and Russia," Del claims. "Roosevelt didn't care about us troops...We called him 'the American Destroyer.' A GI said to me once: 'Did you ever see the Destroyer on the dime?' and I said no. The guy pointed out the head on a dime. It was Roosevelt!"

After his 15 days were through, two MPs came to return Del to headquarters, but he wasn't ready to go just yet. "Hey, listen guys, why don't we take a ride to Viviers, grab a drink before we go?" It was a brothel on Avenue Simon Bolivar. They obliged. Two days later, the three found themselves in Brussels. The MPs then went back to base and likely made up a story that they couldn't find Private First Class DelRossi. From that point, Del's furlough extended to almost a month.

My grandfather then proceeded through Brussels, Luxembourg, and soon took a ferry across the English Channel. His first night in London was during a blackout when the entire city surrendered to darkness in efforts to avoid another Blitz. City lights had guided German planes like a map that even the burn of a cigarette was currently banned.

"I was in this pub lit with candles, it was packed. I seen this girl. I don't remember her name. I picked her up. We went outside. Completely pitch black, all of town. So she had to guide me down the street. She walked me along this canal and when we got to her parents' house, she took off her coat and she was so knocked-up! I never saw it, the bump. It was a blackout! No lights! Her parents said, 'You gotta stay the night.' They were really nice, and they wanted to locate this GI who made her pregnant. A lot of women tried to track them down, but the Army didn't want the GIs to get in trouble. If they inquired, they used to deny you were in the Army. I told her that much...Didn't matter. I went to bed with her anyway. Eight months pregnant, I didn't care."

"Geez, Grandpop!" I interrupt.

"Hey, I wasn't married yet. Let me tell you, kid. You're getting married soon. Men aren't gonna go blind when they get married. I don't know any guy that suddenly loses his vision. It just depends on how their wives treat them."

Del tired of London and finished his furlough in Stroud, a small town in Gloucestershire County two hours away where he was stationed pre-Invasion. There he could admire quiet, sage hills and country cottages tangled in ivy, a place where he could find peace from death. He rented a room in a timeworn chalet from an old couple, and wrote to Rose, which he hadn't done in a month.

Hello darling,

April 1945

I finally reached my destination, England. I'm in a small town called Stroud where we were stationed here before the Invasion. It's a quiet, peaceful town, very beautiful. It's quite a difference from the front lines. I don't do anything but eat and rest and take walks to the country. I really appreciate this furlough, but my only regret is that I can't spend it at home. I miss you terribly Rose, I can't help thinking of you all through the day and night if we could only be together. I guess I can't have everything. I've sort of taken a liking to a small town. I don't think I'll get used to the city anymore. I wonder why? Would you like to live in a small town someday?

Well, how are things going back there? Have you heard from your brother lately? Give him my regards. When you write, how is little Diana? I miss that kid a lot. Give her my love and tell her and that I love her with all my heart.

I'm waiting for that day. I hope you say 'yes', Hon. I'll sign off for now. God bless you and keep you safe, all right.

Lots of love, I remain forever yours,

Anthony

What Del does not mention in the letters, however, was how he had spent his remaining furlough days in Stroud in the company of a young woman.

Del met Joan Porter at the train station the day of his arrival in Stroud. She was a grade school art teacher and her father a well-to-do Englishman. They lived in an estate called Hill House, overlooking the countryside, and though they were a family of wealth and status, "they were kind, down to earth people." Every day after work, Joan and Del would ride on horseback through the county. He stayed for dinners and met the family, and at night, returned to the chalet. "Joan was the only girl that I never touched, just kissed. We had a good time. I spent all day with her just chatting. But, after a week, she started talking about marriage." Del told her he couldn't get serious during the war; he would have to return to the front and likely die there. Even though Victory in Europe was imminent, most men were being sent to the Pacific.

"I couldn't do that to her, die on her."

His furlough ended a few days later, and the MPs came to Stroud to escort him back to the outfit. Joan and Del said their goodbyes. He promised her: "If you don't hear from me, something probably happened."

They never saw each other or spoke again.

Joan Porter could never find Del, even if she wanted to. She would have no recollection of an Anthony DelRossi. He had given her a fake name. It was the same name he gave all the other women: Jack Stupridge, after another engineer in his unit.

"I cannot believe you gave her a fake name! How could you do such a thing? She wasn't like the others," I say.

"I know, I know! It was horrible, but I did her a favor." He pauses. "I never wanted her to find my name on a dead body list."

We sit quietly over his confession, knowing what's done is done. It *was* war, he kept telling me, but I had never seen my grandfather this emotional. Something was wrong.

"What did I know? I was young and stupid. Could you imagine me a rich boy? Nah," he adds. "I should have died over there anyway."

A tear trickles through his deep-set wrinkles. Perhaps he loved Rose and Joan at the same time – or what felt like love – and chose the more practical option. He says his mother convinced him Rose was a good fit for the family, and yet, at this moment, his regret is palpable. There is no doubt now who he should

have truly been with.

He rebounds quickly. “Hey, I wonder if Joan Porter is still around.” Grandpop wipes his year and winks, waiting for Linda’s reaction. “Maybe we should look her up,” he says.

Linda rolls her eyes, “Sure, go ahead.”

Linda and I have always gotten along, despite the family’s difficulties with their marriage. Her cheerful disposition, sense of humor, and patience win most people over – that, and she takes great care of my grandfather. Nonetheless, Linda came into the picture after my grandparents divorced, or possibly before, which everyone suspects. My grandmother was 65-years-old and Linda 25 years younger. It also didn’t help that she was linked to my mother’s circle of friends. The deception seared the bloodlines, my grandmother and mother in particular, and Linda found no forgiveness. Linda and Grandpop never came to functions together, so I never even knew about her, or my grandparent’s separation, until I was headed for college. Now that I was older, the close relationship with my grandfather warranted her acceptance.

Family told me years later that my grandmother couldn’t handle the idea of Linda, couldn’t move on. She became distant and detached after he moved out of the 17th Street brownstone in South Philly. I remember being 12, and the whole family gathering for a typical Sunday dinner at our house. I pushed the tables together, helped set out the silverware, and poured the wine. Fifteen aunts, uncles, cousins, and mothers sat down for three hours of heavy food and loud talk. My grandfather was noticeably absent; of course, I didn’t know why. When you’re a kid, adults think it best to shelter you from the truth.

After the salad and bread were plated, my grandmother suddenly started choking on nothing. My mom quickly grabbed “the big pasta pot,” the one I dreaded dredging up from the cellar each week, and placed it on my grandmother’s lap. An orange, lumpy gravy-like vomit poured into the hated pot. I sat hypnotized until an adult grabbed my arm, escorting me and the other children out of the room. Dinner was over. Aunt Diana pulled me into the bathroom before she left and said: “Don’t you dare ever repeat this, Alicia: Your Grandmother is dying of a broken heart.”

The next year, my Uncle Kent discovered her. She was half-naked, lying on the bathroom floor of the brownstone. My grandmother had mixed heart medication with sleeping pills. This time, she surrendered.

Kent called the family to the house. When my grandfather arrived, he saw Rose and fell to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably, hugging the body, squeezing tightly. “It didn’t have to be this way,” he cried. “Rose, darling, it didn’t have to be this way!” He tried closing her eyelids to feign sleep, but they refused, staring back at him.

Months later, Mom decreed my upcoming confirmation name be made Rose, despite my misgivings. The truth was I hadn’t known much about my grandmother other than she always wore black, demanded a lot of ice in her Coke, blotted the corners of her mouth with a napkin, and gave us Yoo-hoo while she watched her stories. She was mildly affectionate, but our bond was troubled by her sadness, which I naively misjudged. I never witnessed her outbursts, her disdain, or depression. Even still, her shadow seemed to follow me thereafter.

Family members and old neighbors would say how much I resembled her. I couldn’t make a visit to Philly without someone commenting. The large brown eyes, dark hair, cheek bones. I was a true reflection of my spiritual name, even now. “Ali, listen. I called Unc and told him you look exactly like Rose in this picture,” Aunt Diana calls over my recent wedding photo set in black and white, hair pinned in a high bun. “I didn’t care if Linda heard, I said, ‘Del, beautiful. Exactly like Rose, especially in the eyes.’” She breathes dramatically into the phone. “My God.”

Once in a while, I spot her gaze in the mirror. She urges me never to forget, convinced my grandfather had long ago. I swear the contrary, but she detects uncertainty, guilt. She knows where my loyalty resides, and perhaps his was left in Stroud. I beg she make her peace but she never waivers. Forever haunted in life and in death.

Alicia DeFonzo is an English Lecturer at Old Dominion University in Virginia. She is working on her first nonfiction narrative which retraces her grandfather’s journey as an Army combat engineer in WWII Europe. A chapter excerpt entitled “The Camps” about her grandfather’s liberation of a Dachau sub-camp was published in The Montreal Review (2014). DeFonzo received her MFA in Non-Fiction and was awarded The Gettysburg Review Conference Award in Non-Fiction (2014).