

ALL WE KNOW OF HEAVEN

By Nancy Lee Vierra



[Publisher's Note: This story is presented now -- early June 2008 -- in honor of Nancy's father and the spirit behind the sign of Gemini -- the time each year when Father's Day is celebrated in America.]

When I was small my father carried me down steep and rocky paths to lakes, rivers and the sea. Bodies of water became like second homes during my youth. Nothing Mother Nature could proffer quelled the quiet assurance I experienced in his loving arms. I don't remember ever hearing the words from him, but the gentle manner in which he'd scoop me up whenever the way ahead became remotely dangerous, was love expressed to me. Growing up in the 1950s and 60s in rural Oregon was paradise. No matter what Dad pursued - piloting our boat, dancing with Mom, repairing vehicles, water skiing or awaiting a pitch during casual neighborhood baseball games, he exuded strength and earned the respect of everyone around him. I believed there wasn't anything he couldn't accomplish.

Water was the key element in which my dynamic father dwelled. We boated, kayaked, swam and floated our way throughout the Northwest. We scampered in the ocean waves, climbed up dunes and slid back down them on our backsides. I enjoyed watching my father take part in our activities as much as the antics themselves. It made me so happy to see our sometimes stern father laugh and play like a child. Occasionally, Dad would take me by the hand and walk with me along the docks, pointing out how the boats were constructed and their operation. He served in the Navy during WWII as a tail gunner on the battleship, Manila Bay. He never spoke of it, but when I was about 7, I found his mariner's journal and read of his harrowing experiences during some of the terrible battles of the South Pacific and was so disturbed to think he narrowly even made it home from that war. I don't know if I came to love the water through him or if it was a natural inclination for me as well, but any activity on or near it was always a pleasure for me. We slept on the ground and feasted on the fish my father caught. I believed that the future was full of potential, but those blissful trips to the waterways of Oregon are seen now through a curtain of pain.

That quiet confidence I enjoyed while young has sometimes eluded me in my adult life. The way seems often fraught with perilous events and relationships. We were raised up to be self-reliant, never complain and to take what comes with a measure of grace. I've tried to follow those principles,

but often fall short. In the dark of night, when the trials of the day come to taunt me, I visualize my father picking me up. It's remarkable, but I can still see and smell him. His scent was a pleasant potpourri of machinery, strong soap and the woods. I was always watching him, all the little details, gestures and mannerisms I recall now with piercing lucidity. A family member once said, "You came into this world loving your father."

For the most part, I keep this knowledge to myself. Few want to hear about the departed. An abyss of grief has confronted me for more than 40 years. It is an impenetrable void from which I can find no way across. I think it's possible to love someone too much. But how does a child know to maintain affections in moderation? It is only in the hard, cold plane of adulthood that such restraint is honed. Tennyson posed that "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" ...but I wonder.

One day in July 1967, the Pacific took my beloved father's vital life and with it, all the security I would ever know. Troubled thoughts come unbidden surrounding my father's untimely passing. I see him, struggling against the waves and I am lost. In those last moments, was he thinking of us, those whose lives which would be so dramatically altered by the ending of his? Did he think of me, his raven-haired daughter who shadowed him in life? These are questions with no answers. Our family drifted in the savage current of life for years; appalling experiences befell us all. There were no "grief counselors" or help from any quarter. The one bright spot I focused most of my energy on during that shadowy time was my little sister Lisa, not yet 3 when our vibrant father's life ended. Sometimes, I think she came into the world to help us all cope with the tragedy soon to come. She has remained a constant source of sunshine in our sometimes dark, familial world. Eventually, most of my remaining family grounded themselves in the earth with productive and fulfilling lives. I've always worked, managed to stay solvent, maintained enduring friendships and had my own small family, but I never truly came ashore.

I avoid weddings and large gatherings, especially those with pairs of loving parents or anything involving fathers dancing with or celebrating their daughters. I don't covet what they have in any way; it just reminds me of what we lost.

My father is like a ghost. There have been many nights when I have awoken from a deep sleep, hearing my father's voice simply saying my name, nothing more, just my name. I awaken, "Dad, Dad, are you here?" Only the echo of his nocturnal summons hangs in the air. His voice, like everything else about him,

was very distinctive. He has been the most frequent subject in my dreamscape since his death. Some nighttime expeditions are great; I'm on a quest to find him. When I finally do, he sees me and folds me into his arms. I'm so excited to bring him home to my siblings, my mother – inexpressible joy.

When I wake, of course, I realize it was only a dream, and the day is usually a gray one, regardless of the weather. My objective in these dreams is always the same. I desperately want to re-connect with him, talk with him, see his beautiful face, but more than anything, tell him how much he was, and is, loved. In so many of the dreams, I discover him somewhere far from home, ranching in the southwestern desert, building bridges in some faraway city or working in a fishing community on the eastern seaboard. I rush up to him with such elation. He sees me as a stranger. I remind him who I am (since I'm older now than when he died) and how much I've missed him. My entreaties to make him understand, to recognize and claim me as his daughter fall on deaf ears. He doesn't care; he has a new family now, and doesn't have any recollection of being our patriarch and usually turns his back on me and walks away.

Dreams of the latter variety are so painful I feel myself elevating, flying like a bird to escape the cruelty of his rejection. I'm far above him, his second family mere specks on the earth below. Some dreams are so powerful that they remain as memories with more clarity than waking life. One in particular - My once energetic father is alive but paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. We are at a family outing up the North Umpqua River and everyone else is engaged in campsite activities. Dad is trying to gain everyone's attention, making all kinds of insightful suggestions about building the fire, setting up tents and other necessities. No one is paying him any mind. I am sitting on the ground at his side, my hand on his knee. He is getting very upset, "Why are they ignoring me?" he asks, exasperated. I try to reassure him, to comfort him. He keeps attempting to obtain their notice to no avail. Tears well up in his eyes. "Don't let it get to you, Dad, they love you, they just can't hear you," I tell him. "But you can," he replies. I nod and pat his knee. "Why do you suppose that is?" I ask. His answer is a simple one, "Nancy, it's because you're with me." I awoke in the middle of the night, feeling as if I had something far more powerful than a dream, more like a visitation.

As Father's Day looms, Melancholy – often whispering in my ear – sometimes gains an audience. I walk quickly past the store displays for "gift ideas" or avoid the shops altogether. Televised commercials intent on getting people to spend Father's Day dollars on their products are quickly muted. I don't

begrudge others their celebratory day; I just don't want to think about it any more than my troubled mind can bear. Sometimes I imagine having him over for dinner, a beautiful meal, and all courses lovingly homemade by my hands. It saddens me that I never cooked for my father. Careless people complain about having to deal with elderly or cantankerous parents. I can't help think how much I'd be willing to sacrifice for the privilege of taking care of my father in his declining years. When I hear such banter, I want to scream - to rage. And yet, I do nothing but stuff a lifetime of desolation a little farther within. Family members too young, or not yet conceived while my father was alive don't understand. They think I dwell too much. They have no idea.

My maternal grandmother guided me into the world of poetry at an early age. She departed this life 2 years before my father. I discovered Emily Dickinson while most of my peers were beginning to discover boys. A line from one of my favorites, "Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell" resonated profoundly following Dad's demise. Circumstances were certainly all we needed of hell for many years. Often it feels like I'm only here as a half-person. The other portion of myself was buried in the ground with my father. I was only 14, but I felt a tangible departure from deep within as they lowered his casket in the ground. There is no way to convey such despondency, I believe only those who've experienced similar loss can comprehend it.

A man, who would go on to become my closest friend, imparted his first impression of our meeting almost 20 years ago. He said he recognized and was drawn to the sadness in my eyes. I was both moved and surprised. I thought I managed to cover it fairly well. He's a sensitive soul, but I had no idea that my quiet despair was evident to anyone.

The solitary benefit that emerged from all this is I have learned to find happiness in small doses. Little victories, pleasant exchanges, the beauty of nature and the affection shared with family and friends are precious to me. I love and have loved many others on this journey, but I keep myself in check. I turn the damaged side of my heart inward. I persevere, but self-possessed. I wouldn't have wanted any other family and certainly any other father, but sometimes I think perhaps it's not better to have loved and lost. Sometimes.

My father carried me when I was small and I will carry him in my heart until I take my last breath.