**Two Beer Drive**

Michele Lovell

One early summer night, when the downstairs neighbor ran over her husband like a speed bump in front of our apartments, I heard footsteps up and down the metal stairs; so, I got out of bed to see what was happening. I watched my father take an old beach blanket out of the hall closet, his Viceroy ash impossibly long as he shook the sand onto the floor, and took the blanket outside to cover the neighbor until the ambulance came. My father was cool in a crisis. It was the only thing I got from him.

“Get back in bed, Shob,” he said as he was leaving. “Everything’s fine.” He took a long drink from his Schlitz, set it on the coffee table stained with round water marks.

When I was just learning to speak, I couldn’t pronounce my own name. The best I could do was Shobby. My father never used my given name. To him I was Shobby or Shob. Or Buddy. Once he even called me Guy. I never understood and I never asked why. But these were the names he called me.

My father’s brother died just before he turned two. Dead Jackie, the beautiful child with the curly black hair and sad brown eyes frozen forever in that photo on the living room end table. Who would’ve grown up to be a good Catholic boy, gone to mass every Sunday, never talked back his mother. Who would’ve worked in his father’s upholstery shop and never complained. Except they found him dead in his crib one summer morning.

My father could never be everything that boy could’ve been. All that expectation and hope, they buried it with Jackie and he, the surviving son, was left with what remained. There was no room for anyone else’s anger in that house but his father’s so he buried his own. While his mother sent him hunting for his dad in the bars of Youngstown to haul him home on those snowy back roads. Late at night, listening to him yell the whole way, the heater in the truck not working. And he’d damn well better get up for mass in the morning.

It was two months before my father’s death, the last time I saw him. We went to Fort Washington, the civil war fort overlooking the Potomac River. When we were kids, this is where he took us on vacation: the beaches along the Chesapeake Bay or the civil war monuments of Pennsylvania and Maryland. Vast empty battle fields full of weeds and buried bones. We’d drive forever to walk the fields in the sticky heat, read the plaques, buy souvenirs and go home.

“I love these old forts,” he said as we sat in the sun at Fort Washington. “Not as much as the beach, but I love ‘em.” I wondered what he loved about them, but I didn’t ask. It was so hot, my shirt was sticking to my back, and my brother was trying to get us to smile for a photo sitting next to a pole with an American flag hanging limp in the heavy air. In the photo I’m leaning towards him, and he’s leaning away from me. So slightly.

Getting back on the freeway, he complained about how bad the traffic had gotten over the years. How living in Maryland and commuting to D.C. or Virginia was now just a pain in the ass.

“Used to be, that drive from work to home was a two beer drive,” he said, shaking his head. “I’d hate to see what it is now.” I was thinking it was funny, how he measured distance in beer like most people measured miles. I was thinking it was funny how, when he was drunk he was scary, but when he was sober he was worse. I could feel the tension coming off him like the high-pitched sound our TV made even when it was turned down. Could I feel it or hear it? I couldn’t decide. No one believed me but I knew it was real. Both my father and the old TV gave off some frequency only I could feel.

He’d spent three years in the army in between Korea and Vietnam so they buried him at Quantico. I could almost hear him saying “Man they buried me for free!” We might’ve had a laugh about that. Like we might have laughed at how everyone jumped when the six gun salute went off. Or the priest in his brown cassock and sandals who looked like Friar Tuck. He said a prayer for my father’s soul. Then two Marines folded a flag into a perfect triangle and gave it to his wife in honor of his service on behalf of Bill Clinton.

His stepson spoke tearfully about what a great father he’d been and how much he’d be missed. I kept having to remind myself he was talking about my father, as he stood there in his grief. Years later, I would stand at my own stepfather’s funeral and feel the same way, and I would feel happy for that boy, that he had a someone to raise him. A man he would cry for. A man he would miss. It took me 20 years to feel that. I wish I could say it was different.

It was a beautiful fall day and a Marine played taps somewhere in the distance. One of my cousins gave me a flower, and I put it on his casket and said goodbye to him for the last time.

Back at the condo we made small talk and ate from paper plates. I looked at the photos of his stepson’s kids lining the walls, the picture of Little Dude, the Yorkie he loved so much. I memorized some of what he left behind that evening, and I signed the guestbook Shob, so he would know it was me.