

Denise Taylor

Bryan Oesterreich
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Independence Day

Just a few weeks prior to this past Fourth of July, my family awakened to a sunny, Sunday morning and honored the invitation of close friends to attend their church. We entered through the two dark glass doors with brass handles and my husband, John, led the way down the slender hallway. He moved his six foot four frame aside to scribble our names in the guest book, which rested on its own wooden pedestal, and my heart stopped. I felt every drop of blood drain from my veins, which left my body ice cold. I was almost sure that my Dad, Ray, was standing at the entrance to the sanctuary. I peeped around John to study the silver haired man who cordially greeted people, one by one, as they entered and passed them a Sunday morning bulletin.

His mannerisms portrayed a man in his fifties with a conservative republican profile, which besides his love for classic Mustangs, was all that I knew. Four years ago, my mom had finally broken the taboo subject and pointed him out to me at a Smoke on the Water Festival on the Washington Waterfront. On that brisk October morning he was running for a County Commissioner seat. Prior to that knowledge, I would grieve each time I realized that we could be in the same room together and I would not know it.

The last time I had seen my “real father” I was only a scrawny, pale, blonde-headed child, only two years old. In one particular memory, I recall him holding my thin, fragile, toddler hand in his strong, confident grip as we hurriedly followed my Grandmother across the steamy blacktop parking lot into the back of McClellon’s Dime

Store across from the brick County Courthouse. It must have been in the summer, because I could feel the heat radiating over my white-strapped sandals as I held my soft-bodied blonde baby doll tightly next to my seersucker sundress. I remember the challenge of maintaining 3 steps to the “grown-ups” one step and not losing my prized baby doll in the process. I did not know what we were going to buy, but I did know I never saw my Dad after that day. It was back in the mid-sixties and my struggling young parents painfully decided to divorce.

My Mom remarried and her new husband adopted me and treated me as his own. My fate would be decided by the unfortunate circumstances of an agreement that I would have no further contact with my biological father. I was well cared and provided for but the ever-present feelings of loneliness, poor self-esteem, and the pain of incompleteness tormented me. These feelings incarcerated and handicapped me into an overly eager to please adult who was desperate for belonging and acceptance.

For the next three consecutive Sundays in June I held my breath, as we would pass in the moderately sized church, waiting for him to say something to me. I smiled warmly and returned his greetings with poise and maturity. But secretly, I searched his soft set blue eyes yearning for some sign that he recognized me. I wept during the services and mourned for the relationship that I never had.

Then came my most memorable Sunday, the Fourth of July. Despite the overwhelming feelings of confusion and my inability to see the opportunity God had put before me, I reluctantly agreed to join John and my treasured, beautiful blonde, twelve-year-old daughter, Olivia, for a joyous celebration at the Pastor’s house. It was hard for

me to share the excitement of the occasion because I knew I would be faced with my estranged father and all of my insecurities would be resurfacing.

We arrived at the stained brown beach house with cathedral ceilings and a row of windows overlooking the peaceful water. The house was anchored on the bank of Bath Creek and canopied by towering pine and oak trees. The weather was an uncommonly comfortable temperature for a July in Eastern North Carolina with low humidity and a light breeze flowing from the creek. The scene was one of a traditional Southern Pig Pickin' which the entire congregation and their friends were invited. There were rows of long white plastic tables overflowing with covered dishes, desserts, and other endless choices of food and beverages. Three huge pig cookers lined up against the woods and I could taste the thick hickory smoke that trickled out of the vents and from under the heavy black metal lids. Ray stood manning his particular cooker with a spatula in one hand and an oven mitt in the other. I walked somberly over the carpet of green summer grass to the back of the house that faced the long pier where the children were jumping without any fear into dark water. Olivia helped me position our mismatched set of collapsible chairs in a circle like an old-fashioned wagon train. John had not been sitting in his green cloth covered chair very long before he proclaimed he had to "stretch his legs". This was plausible as he often became fidgety in social functions such as this, and he unfolded his long legs out of the small camping chair. He weaved in and out of the tall trees until he was out of sight. I assumed that he really wanted to talk with the pastor about joining the church because John had been trying to corner him earlier. As a true soul mate, John, understood how heavy my heart felt about not knowing if Ray had

forgotten me or if he was choosing to ignore me. I attempted to carry on a conversation with a nearby friend to try and distract myself.

John returned within about 5 minutes with a confident smile and almost sang, “It’s going to be a great evening!” This was not a usual comment for him to make under all the social pressure for homebodies like us. A few moments passed, then John nonchalantly announced, “He didn’t know who you were.”

Time stood still. I wrinkled my nose and frowned, “What are you talking about?” Yet my inner voice told me I knew what he was talking about but could not comprehend the possibilities.

“He had no idea who you were,” John professed with wisdom and kindness in his eyes, “and he wants to meet you. He has been married to his wife, Emma, since 1976 and has had two heart bypasses within the same year. He says he has never forgotten you.” A peaceful expression came across my face as my heart began to soften. John took me by the hand and led me back to the smoky pig cookers. People were lining up to fill their plates while Ray moved to the side to meet with us. Emma came to stand beside him and I noticed her for the first time. Her salt and pepper hair softly framed her face. She had a smile of sunshine that was bursting with anticipation.

I could not read the expression on Ray’s face at first, but then he smiled and kindly said, “It’s good to meet you daughter.” He wrapped his arms around me and I hugged my Dad after 36 years of precious time we had lost. In a confident voice Ray assured me, “I have always thought about you and hoped that in time we would find each other.” He explained, “I knew the Lord was keeping me around for a reason, so many times I came close to death, but came back around, between recovering from lymphoma

and undergoing a year of radiation that left my arteries hardened, so that fifteen years later I had to have two heart bypasses,” as he stretched out his arm to reveal a scar that traveled down his entire forearm, “they had to use the veins here.” I wanted to drop to my knees and praise God right then, because I was so appreciative that I had been given this chance to heal. I was hearing the very answers that I needed.

Emma added, “I have prayed for this many years. We even used to ride by your house.”

We were inseparable the rest of the evening, spending our holiday as a family. It came so natural that we did not have to try hard. The pain from a hurtful past eased with each word. I was immediately comforted by my Dad’s acceptance and love. Before long, the empty 36-year-old ache in my heart melted away. The evening was so surreal I was afraid I would wake up in the morning and this would all be a dream. We watched the evening sky with its reddish-orange sun among the deep milky purple clouds gently set over the rippling creek. The sun sank into the water and pushed of my insecurities below the surface. I was a whole person now, and the heavy burdens lifted from me. I felt just as light as that evening summer breeze. This Fourth of July ended while we all watched the brilliant screaming firecrackers burst over the water but this time they represented an entirely new meaning of Independence Day.

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