

DAVID CHRISINGER

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## **In the Shadow of an Unanswered Question**

**M**y grandfather died on a Sunday. His name was Harold Chrisinger—his friends called him “Hod.” He was a rough-hewn man, undereducated and overburdened, who fought in the Second World War and came home a drunk. He didn’t want to fight. Some think that’s why he knocked up my grandmother before either one of them could finish high school. Maybe they wouldn’t need a man with a baby on the way. The draft board took him anyway, and by the time his daughter was born, in the early fall of 1944, he was training for war. By the time he turned 19, he was on the island of Okinawa, fighting in the longest and deadliest battle of the Pacific Theater. He didn’t like to talk about his war. He never spoke a word of it to me, and my father remembers only a handful of stories, fragments really.

I heard from my father’s older brother once that when my grandfather was a younger man, when he still hung around some of the other veterans in town, he would talk. Only to other veterans, though. Usually around the John Deere tractor repair shop my grandfather ran with his father. My uncle would hang around there sometimes when he was little and listen in when the other fellas started telling their stories. He remembers Hod mostly listening while he turned wrenches and checked fluids, sometimes scoffing or rolling

his eyes at the stories he heard. If someone pressed him to share something about the war, he would look up from whatever motor he was working on and tell them about the Shermans he was trained to drive, what a bitch they were to steer. He'd laugh about the sergeant he met at the processing center at Fort Sheridan, just north of Chicago. He'd found out my grandfather grew up on a farm and knew how to drive a tractor. *If you can drive a tractor*, he'd said, *you can drive a tank*. Round peg. Round hole. Sometimes he'd say that his tank company had been nearly wiped out in some disastrous battle no one back home had ever heard about, that the mission was doomed from the beginning. Incompetent officers, he'd say as he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his grease-stained hand. The other vets would nod in commiseration.

There was one story he didn't mind telling his family. Sometimes, when the mood struck, he would talk about a captain he admired who would sit with my grandfather and the other men in the company at night, just before the mortars started thundering down around them, and check to make sure they had everything they needed. That's what a *real* leader looks like, he'd say. Not like his lieutenant. He hated his lieutenant, mostly because he'd threatened to shoot my grandfather once, late in the battle, while they were tasked with mopping up the last of the Japanese resistance on the island. The company was patrolling somewhere in the hills on the northern half of the island, and my grandfather discovered a young, unarmed Japanese soldier hiding in the brush. The lieutenant thought my grandfather had been too gentle with the prisoner, so he chewed my grandfather's ass and threatened to shoot him if he didn't start treating the enemy like the treacherous bastards they were. *That Jap was just a scared kid, like me*, my grandfather would say.

I was only fourteen-years-old when my grandfather passed. At that time, I hadn't heard any of these stories about him. I didn't know where he had served or what he had done. I only found those things later, after I began my investigation. All I knew was that he fought and that he came home a changed man. That's what everyone said. In the years after the war, he did things and said things—terrible things. Things no husband or father should ever do or say. Things that

people avoided talking about because he was a war hero. But I didn't know what those things were exactly. My father's family didn't like to talk about those things. My father hated being asked questions. Most of what I learned about my grandfather when I was a teenager, I learned from my mother. She would tell me about all the childhood trauma my father had survived. Looking back, I think she wanted me to better understand why my father had a tendency to be emotionally distant, numb even. The one story that's stuck with me after all these years is the one about the night my grandmother rolled her eyes to something cruel my grandfather said to her at the dinner table. Instead of apologizing, my grandfather flew into a fit of rage, grabbed her by the hair in front of my father and his young siblings, dragged her into the bathroom, and stuck her head face first into the toilet. After he was finished, he returned to the dinner table—my grandmother sobbing in a ball on the bathroom floor—and continued eating his porkchop and baked potato as if nothing happened.

On the day before my grandfather was slated to be buried, the nondescript funeral home in Hixton, Wisconsin that prepared his body hosted a wake in the early evening. As my father and I approached the front door of the home, about an hour before the wake was supposed to begin, a late summer breeze whistled through the green-leafed trees that lined the parking lot. As we entered the front entryway, a flowery fragrance overpowered the scent of freshly cut grass that dominated the outside air. As my father and I entered the parlor with its gold-yellow walls and dimly lit wall sconces, we found my grandfather's silver casket open on the upper half and positioned as far from the door as possible. Stands of flowers flanked each end of the casket, and a small oak table with a folded American flag and a black and white photo of my grandfather in his tan service uniform standing next to my grandmother stood sentry near the foot. The funeral director was nowhere to be found, so my father ducked out to locate him. Left alone with my grandfather, I felt this strange compulsion to see his body up close. I'd seen a handful of dead deer and other animals I'd hunted in the woods of central Wisconsin, but I'd never seen the lifeless body of someone I knew.

As I cautiously approached the casket, like a hunter stalking through the forest, my tan corduroy pants swished with each step. This was my first funeral, and I had no black pants or shirts. The best I could muster was a maroon short-sleeved button-up and tan pants. When I reached the foot of the casket, I looked at the framed photo of my grandparents then peered over the edge of the casket, suddenly afraid I might somehow disturb the presentation. The first thing I noticed, after pushing my glasses up higher on my nose, was how healthy my grandfather looked compared to the last time I'd seen him alive. That time he was lying in a hospital bed, trapped beneath a tangle of cords and hoses. His body was swollen, and the air was heavy with August humidity and smelled of disinfectant.

He had been near death when my father found him in the one-room shack he called home. That day, my father discovered my grandfather hunched over his small, Formica-topped table, legs spread wide, his bloated gut resting between his thighs and bulging out of his dirty overalls. His breathing was labored; his eyes bulged out of his head. The blood vessels in his nose had mostly popped, leaving red and purple scratch-like streaks flowing over his nose and under his eyes. I doubt he had been expecting company, for if he had, he probably would have made sure he wouldn't get caught with a half empty bottle of black berry brandy and a garbage can full of crushed Old Style cans. The year before, the doctors at the VA told my father that if my grandfather didn't stop drinking, he'd soon be dead. And it wouldn't be quick or painless, either. Cirrhosis of the liver kills you slowly. My grandfather's blood pressure was way too high, the doctors said, and none of the medication they tried was having much of an effect. He was also losing excretory function. My father didn't know what that was and at the time didn't have the wherewithal to ask for clarification. Plus, there was the massive ascites—the extreme bloating of the belly—and the variceal hemorrhages. And the hepatic encephalopathy and renal impairment. That's what you get, the doctors said, after nearly six decades of alcoholism.

As my father sped to the hospital with my grandfather beached in the backseat of the four-door sedan he was driving, my father tried to keep my grandfather awake and talking. They talked about the weather

and how the hay was ready for the third harvest of the year. This was the busy time of the year for my grandfather when he was still working. For four decades, he had been known as the best combine mechanic in three counties. It was the only thing he was ever good at.

At his father's hospital bedside, my father wanted to say something—anything. He would have liked to say good bye and that he forgave him for all the hurt and anguish he put the family through, but my father couldn't find the words. The shame was still too raw, the smell too intense. He wasn't even dead yet, but my grandfather had begun to rot. Instead of talking, my father stood and stared at this man who had scared and tormented him for so long, who was now nothing more than a weak, dying old man. He looked at his face, the wisps of hair on the top of his head and the silver three-day-old stubble that covered his chin and cheeks. He saw himself. Unlike the rest of his siblings, my father couldn't bring himself to forgive or to even hope that he and his father were going to get another chance, in some other place, at some other time, to discover who the other was. He didn't understand his father, and his father didn't understand him, and there was nothing he could say in those last few hours to change that.

Lying in his casket, my grandfather looked peaceful and calm—a testament to the funeral director's skill. The caked-on makeup covered up the evidence of the broken blood vessels, and a clean shave paired with the desiccation that occurs at death left him looking square-jawed and resolute. His eyes and mouth were closed, and his upper body was dressed in a white, short-sleeved, button-up shirt long out of style.

I realized as I came up next to him that I had never really studied his face before. In the summertime, when my father would take us along for our annual visit with Grandpa Hod, I was always too nervous to look at him. He scared me. After we'd arrive, my brother, mother, and I would stand in the tall, un-mowed grass in my grandfather's front yard as my father knocked on the door and went inside to see if his father was even still alive. My father feared for years that it would take weeks for someone to discover if my grandfather was dead. He had no friends. No telephone. Once inside his house, we would line up as a family, from tallest to shortest, and try not to stick to anything

while my father chit-chatted with my grandfather. The tension exhausted me.

Looking at his face now for the first time I felt alone with him and scared of what his body might feel like. I pictured him opening his eyes, smiling at me, like this was all a big practical joke. After turning to see whether anyone had entered the parlor without me realizing it, I turned back to my grandfather and reached out a shaking hand. I first poked his chest, just under the collar bone. There was no more elasticity to his skin. Not like when you poke the jelly-like body of a deer you've just shot to make sure it's really dead. He was more rock than flesh. Feeling emboldened, I placed my left hand on his chest, near where his heart once beat. It was only for a moment. Then I heard a rustling behind me and quickly stuffed both my hands into my pockets. I kept looking at my grandfather's face, pretending I hadn't just felt him up, as my father approached from behind and to my left. He placed his right hand on my left shoulder and stared inside the casket with me.

The dark, yellowy complexion of my grandfather's face made it seem as if it had been sculpted in wax. I realize now, seventeen years later, that it was this waxiness that prevented any sort of feeling of intimacy, not that there ever had been any of that before he died. I don't remember crying at all that day. Maybe because I was no longer looking at my grandfather, but something that resembled him. A shell that was once a body. Maybe because I never really knew him. Maybe because he never wanted to be known. As far as I was concerned, he was but a couple of pictures and a handful of fragmented stories. It's hard to mourn such an abstraction.

When I was young, I didn't know how to ask about my grandfather. I wanted to know why he lived by himself in a run-down shack in some forgotten farming town with dirty tractor parts piled on the kitchen table and even dirtier dishes stacked in the sink, why he was happy my grandmother left him, why he drank so much and didn't take care of himself, and why he never came for Christmas or even mailed a birthday card. So many unknowns. Even as I grew older, I still felt like I couldn't ask these questions. I knew something was there, but I tiptoed around it. The obscurity that enveloped him

always felt deliberately constructed, though I don't think he had any willing accomplices to help support his obfuscation. His story had become a taboo of sorts, not because it was a secret per se, but because it was unknown and because folks didn't talk about those sorts of things.

What really happened to my grandfather during the war? Something *must* have happened, we all thought. How bad was that tank battle, really? Did his tank survive? Or was he hit and had to save himself somehow? And what about that Japanese soldier he captured? Why were they patrolling on foot? What happened to the tanks? How did he treat the prisoners he came in contact after that day? Did he start to hate the treacherous bastards the same way his lieutenant had? What does it even mean to "mop up" after a battle is mostly over? Did he lose any friends? Did he ever kill anyone? No one could be sure. None of us knew the details of what he experienced, except for witnessing the mental and emotional damage these things left in their wake.

About seven years ago, I started asking questions again, looking for answers. I was tired of the silence and the secrets. The most tired I'd ever felt. I was tired of the guessing and the pretending, the lack of curiosity. The fake acceptance. The fear of acceptance. My father has avoided his memories like a man who makes peace with the scars from a car accident he can't bring himself to remember. It's in the past. Forget it. It doesn't matter now, anyway. But I can't. I'm not like my father. I can't pretend the past isn't real. I can't accept that we do not know the truth. I can't just walk away from the smoke and the muffled screams of the overturned car in the ditch that is my family's past. I can't ignore the blood splattered on the road. I have to search. I have to investigate. I have to make sense of it all.

**DAVID CHRISINGER** is the Director of Writing Seminars for *The War Horse*, the only non-profit newsroom that focuses specifically on issues related to the military and post-9/11 veterans. Chrisinger is also the editor of *See Me for Who I Am*, a collection of essays written by student veterans he taught at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point that aims to help bridge the cultural gap that divides his students from the American people they fought to protect. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, Ashley, and their two young sons.