

Adult Essay Honorable Mention

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By Sarah Birnbach, Rockville

My father knocked gently on my open bedroom door. As the sole male in a household of four women, he respected our privacy like a sacred flame. His right hand was clenched in a fist, an uncharacteristic gesture for a man who abhorred violence. The solemnity in his deep-set brown eyes told me we were on the brink of something serious.

Clothes and books and my beloved time-worn quilt were piled around my room as I was readying to leave home for my freshman year at college.

“I want to give you something,” my father’s voice a soft whisper. “But first I want you to know the story.”

I sat on my clothes-strewn bed and waited.

“It was Nov. 17, 1944,” my father began. “It was my first day in combat and I’d been sent to join ‘C’ company to replace a fallen comrade. At about 3 a.m. we got the word that our company would lead an attack on the small town of Apweiler in Germany. We were waiting until dawn to move out. I knew no one in my unit. I was alone and scared. I looked out from my foxhole and saw eight guys standing around chatting and devouring their ‘K’ rations like a last meal. I decided I’d join them so I crawled out of my foxhole. Just then, a German 88 millimeter shell landed where we stood. When I came to, the medic told me that all the others were dead before they hit the ground.”

“Oh, Daddy,” were the only words I could muster hearing the muscle-stiffening story for the first time.

“When you’re 18 years old and lying in a hospital bed recovering for weeks, all alone 4,000 miles from home, you have a lot of time to reflect on what’s important. And it’s family.”

He stopped, his eyes focusing on the signs of my imminent departure.

“You’re leaving home for the first time,” he said, “the same age I was when I shipped overseas. You might feel scared and lonely. But I know you’ll come out OK, as I did.”

He slowly opened his fingers. Resting in his palm was his Purple Heart medal, awarded to him for the injuries he sustained at Apweiler.

“I want you to have this medal to remind you that no matter how alone you may feel, I’ll always be here for you.” Tiny pools lined his lower lids. Lost for words, I sprung from my bed and

hugged him as if willing away all the fear and loneliness he had suffered. His return embrace made words unnecessary.

That medal has sustained me through all the ups and downs of my life. It sits to this day on my bookcase, mounted on purple velvet in a shadow box with a gold frame, showcasing the medal's colors and reminding me of my father's service to our country, of his love for me, and that no matter how lonely I may feel, I am never alone.