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Come in...and be captivated...

"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.





"Moving Among the Margins: Passage" by Ken Steinkamp, RI, USA. [kensteinkamp.com/](http://www.kensteinkamp.com/)

About this image: *I came across the word "margins" by happenstance while creating this painting.*

It was an epiphany.

This painting evolved over many months. It began as a textured abstract expressionist canvas consisting of several black and white obscured figures.

I then felt compelled to attach acrylic panels that I proceeded to paint and score on both sides. While attaching, I overlaid some but created spaces between others.

The result is a painting of three layers of expression or passages, seeking harmony and meaning within the obscured margins that define and frame the "Passages" enigma.
—Ken Steinkamp, RI, USA. Copyright 2016.

The Hockey Helmet

by Randy Richardson

My little sister can't stop crying, and it annoys the hell out of me. *Grow up*, I want to tell her. But of course I don't say a word. No one in this family says anything.

The house feels empty now that my dad's living in a studio apartment ten miles away. I act like it's no big deal because that's what a big brother's supposed to do. Ten years old and I'm the man of the family. I don't want this. I didn't ask for this. I want to just be a kid again.

The house is too quiet after I close the door at night. That's when the tears that I've stored up all day come pouring out onto the pillow and the sleeves of my Chicago Bears pajamas. This has been going on for a week now. I want it to stop. I want my dad back home. Where he belongs.

My eight-year-old sister and I sit at the dinner table picking at the chop suey from a can. I can't eat this. My mom can't take it anymore. She looks like she's on the verge of tears, and I blame her and I don't. She's at her wit's end, when she tells us that we're getting out of the house, which is probably what we need more than anything else. Because that house is nothing more now than a reminder of what used to be and it's suffocating all of us.

In the backseat of the Maverick, my sister looks to me. She doesn't look sad or happy. Just confused. I shrug, holding back the urge to slug her. I know she's hurting. But can't she see I'm hurting too? I just want her to leave me alone. Because I know what she's thinking and I can't stop thinking the same thing: What did we do wrong? Really the question that plagues me is: What did *I* do wrong? Because I can't stop blaming myself for what has happened. Was it because I wet the bed? Or was it that day I pulled the cord on the record player and the flames started? I froze, not knowing what I'd done or what to do. My dad smothered the fire with my sister's favorite blanket but I can't stop thinking about it. That maybe if I hadn't wet the bed or pulled that cord none of this would be happening now.

As we drive, I feel like I can start to breathe again. I've no idea where we're going but I don't care as I look out the window at the glowing streetlights and neon signs on the storefronts, which are a welcome sight only because they aren't the four walls of my bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, we're in the near-empty parking lot of Children's Bargain Town. My mom cranes her neck to look at us sitting in a rare state of calm in the backseat, as far away from one another as we can be but yet somehow probably closer than we've ever been. "You each get to pick out one toy," she tells us.

Heads turn simultaneously, and from the two ends of the back seat, our eyes—my sister's and mine—meet for the first time since we'd entered the car. Turning to my mom, I broach the question that I'm sure my sister won't ask but is dying to know. "Any toy?"

"Well," she says, "within reason."

What does *within reason* mean? I have no idea. It's one of those terms that grownups toss out there just to confuse us. Does it mean five dollars? Ten? Twenty? Does it mean it can be as big as a basketball, but not as big as a bicycle? The various calculations are running through my head like a stock ticker and I realize that for the first time since my parents sat us down a week ago and broke the news to us that they were splitting, I wasn't thinking about that one word that I couldn't bring myself to say to anyone. *Divorce*. Such a cold word. I zip my jacket all the way to the neck to protect against the chill in the air.

You hear things on the playground. Hurtful things. Kids say things without even thinking, oftentimes without even knowing what it is they're saying. I've heard them talk about broken families. But I didn't know what they meant. I didn't know any families that were broken. I didn't know how you could break a family; that your mom and dad could just call it quits and that suddenly you could have two houses and not just one. How could I have not seen it coming? How could I have not better prepared myself for it?

I keep asking myself: How could I have not done something to stop it from happening? Why instead of running out of the house and crying didn't I do something to make them stop yelling at each other? Stop! Stop! Stop! What are you doing? Why are you hurting each other? Why are you hurting *me*?

The store is huge. What do I do now? I look up at my mom, and she gives me the nod and I wander through the aisles filled with GI Joe action figures and Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots. It feels like Christmas in July. Sort of.

I am overwhelmed by it all, both literally and figuratively. There are too many choices. There are too many uncertainties, and it's not just the toys. It's my life. The life that I knew. The life I liked. Scratch that, the life I loved. I still have the baseball cards and the banana seat bicycle. That hasn't changed. But now these things don't seem so important to me. I'm paralyzed by the uncertainty of what my life will be like now. As I take in all of the toys that surround me, I realize there is no toy in this gigantic store that will change this plain and simple fact; that I am now nobody; that what I really want is a time machine—a toy that will make things right again and put my dad back in the house and stop my sister from crying and dry all the wetness off my pillowcase and pajama sleeves.

When I get to the checkout line I see my sister holding tightly to a doll. I hand my mom a ten dollar hockey helmet. It's like the one that Stan Mikita wears, only it's not, because his is white and mine is blue. My mom hesitates as her brows furrow. "This is your choice?" I nod, understanding her confusion. I don't play hockey. I can barely stand on ice skates.

In the backseat of the Maverick I rip the tags off the helmet as my mom starts up the car. I place the helmet on my head. It fits snugly; warm, like a blanket; but hard, like a protective shell. I catch my mom's eyes in the rearview mirror and read the worry on them. I offer a slight smile in return.

By the end of the summer of 1971, I was living in a new home, in a new town, going to a new school. I had not just lost the family that I knew. I'd lost everything that I knew. I was no longer that kid with the Cubs hat. Or that kid who fought Rick Ritter and became his best friend. Or that kid who ran the fastest 50-yard dash in school. That kid was gone.

What my mom couldn't see through that rearview as she looked at me in that hockey helmet is that for the first time in my life, I was looking beyond the next day. Because even then I sensed that my life as I knew it would never be the same again, and that I'd probably never have it back. That hockey helmet didn't fix anything. It didn't bring my mom and dad back together again. It certainly didn't heal me. But it did help to cushion some of the blows. It might have been the best ten dollars my mom could have spent on me at that time of my life.

Bio- An attorney and award-winning journalist, Randy Richardson is a founding member and president of the Chicago Writers Association. His essays have been published in the anthologies *Chicken Soup for the Father and Son Soul*, *Humor for a Boomer's Heart*, *The Big Book of Christmas Joy*, *Be There Now*, and *Cubbie Blues: 100 Years of Waiting Till Next Year*, as well as in numerous print and online journals and magazines. He is the author of two novels, *Cheeseland* and *Lost in the Ivy*, both from Eckhartz Press.

Christmas Eve, 1961

by Sam Culotta

Love is a good way to break a heart, but an empty airport on Christmas Eve can do a pretty decent job of it too. The only voice you hear is the disembodied vocals of the PA system announcing departures but no arrivals. Or maybe it's the other way around. I pace across the tile floors, my military shoes echo off the walls half-heartedly. In the coffee shop there is a man wearing a rain coat, the kind detectives wear in cop movies. We drink coffee and smoke cigarettes from opposite ends of the counter. He must be a regular traveler because the waiter leans toward him as they talk just loud enough to not be heard. The coffee's not bad for airport coffee and I move the cup from place to place thinking of Eliot's poem...something about counting the days in empty cups or spoons, or coffee rings. I wish I could remember, damn it. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." There it is! You get a lot of time to think sitting in a coffee shop near

midnight. The cigarette is beginning to taste like the smell of an overstuffed ash tray.

I brought a book to read but can't bear to open it up. *Too Late the Phalarope* by Alan Paton, a South African writer. It was given to me by a casual friend from my dismal college years when I was making a half-assed effort to get a college education on the cheap. A rare bird for the group of people I know, he's quite literate, well-read, and suffers from some sort of skeletal abnormality that gives him that artistic look we wannabe's strive to achieve. Funny thing is, he stole the book from the public library so his generosity is not without irony. He introduced me to Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a monstrous satire with oversized organs and grotesque characters that we found really exciting. I think he and his family moved away so I probably won't see him again. I'd started to read the Paton book while I was on leave, but it's just not working for me. I should have brought *Catcher in the Rye*; I can read Salinger over and over. The kid in *Catcher* is the universal misfit teen, the one most of us think we are. So, maybe it's best I don't have it with me since I'm already feeling lower than whale shit.

My plane to Spokane, WA doesn't leave for a while yet. I've never been there but it sounds nice. What sadistic company clerk schedules a guy to report to his first permanent assignment on Christmas Day? It's a rhetorical question of course, we're talking about the military here. Speaking of which, the few people I've seen since I boarded the plane in L.A. didn't seem to care one damn bit that I'm a man in uniform, a proud Airman Third Class in the Air Force of these United States. No siree, no respect, not even a mention of my status as a protector of their freaking freedoms. In fact, the stewardess in Los Angeles had the audacity to scold me for not putting my duffle bag in the overhead compartment. *Excuse me!* I was a little bit distracted by the sight of my young fiancée's tear-streaked face peering over the fence.

That same pretty face is why I bombed out in college. At least that's my excuse. Truth be told, I was wandering aimlessly around campus with no plans. But you learn things in college in spite of yourself. I learned that career counselors are about as useful as a third nostril. When I felt I had drifted so far off track as to be wasting my time, I gave counseling a try. Here is what he offered: "What do you want to be?" Really? I told him that was why I was sitting across from him; I didn't know what to do or where to go. "Finish the class you're failing now and let's see where we go from there." Turns out that where we go from there is into the Air Force. My high

school counselor wasn't much better. I only saw him when I needed discipline. He once threw me out of an assembly because I was combing my hair during the National Anthem. In retrospect, that was a stupid thing for me to do.

"The Voice" announces an arrival. I walk over to the observation window and watch a jet land, then taxi to a resting place. I hear voices. People have appeared out of nowhere full of excitement and with arms filled with gaily wrapped Christmas gifts. In a few minutes the arrivals flow into the terminal amid much gleeful noise. There is kissing and hugging and laughter. "Merry Christmas!" someone shouts. I look at my watch and I notice it's midnight, the hour my family traditionally begins opening presents. *Well, this is nice*, I tell myself. I'm standing here alone in the Portland airport at midnight watching complete strangers immersing themselves in the warmth of family and the joy of Christmas. At least I think I'm alone. As I take a seat and light up another cancer stick, I notice an elderly lady walking over toward me. She steps into a phone booth and drops in some coins. The happy family has departed so I can hear every word she says.

"Hi, honey, it's Mom."

"No, I'm alright, really. Is he still angry?"

"I know, I know. I didn't mean to become a problem; I'm so sorry it upset you and the kids. Are they doing OK, now?"

"That's good. Please give them a big hug and kiss from Grandma, and tell them I love them so very much and I'm sorry I didn't see them before I left."

"What? Oh, that's OK. Yes dear, I know you love me and I'm sure your husband doesn't dislike me. It's just difficult being a mother-in-law staying with your daughter's family and not getting in the way."

"Yes, I understand. I'm sure it will all work out. I just felt it was best for me to leave and let you and your family get back to normal."

"Listen, darling, I don't want to worry you but I have a bad feeling about this flight I'm taking... I know it's silly, but you know how I get these premonitions and can't shake them? No, let me finish. Besides wanting to talk to you and to apologize for causing discord in your beautiful little

family, I want you to know that I've purchased life insurance and I've named you and the children as beneficiaries of my estate."

"Now, don't be upset. I don't want you to worry, I just want you to know in case something happens."

"Oh, I know nothing's going to happen but just in case it does, I wanted you to be aware that I purchased the insurance. OK?"

"Now, now, darling, please don't worry about me, I'll be just fine. I understand and I blame myself as much as anybody for what happened. Now, I'm going to have to go because I think they're about to call my flight soon."

"Yes, I will...and I do love you so much."

"OK, then, bye-bye sweetheart, bye-bye."

As she leaves the booth she's sniffing a little. I put my head down so she doesn't know I've been listening to her conversation.

"Hello, young man. I see you're in the Air Force. Where are you stationed?"

"Spokane," I tell her.

"Oh, that's where I'm going too. We must be on the same flight."

"Yes, I suppose we are."

"Well, let's hope it's a smooth trip. Maybe I'll see you on the airplane."

Small and fragile looking, she walks toward the gate area. Sweet as she is, she's managed to add trepidation to the list of miseries I'm feeling. It's only the third flight of my entire life and now it may be my last. I think about insurance but I have nothing to bequeath and I'm sure the U.S. Government would have to pay some sort of benefit to my parents. That's small comfort given the circumstances.

I find my seat and stow my duffle bag in the overhead compartment to avoid getting scolded by the stewardess this time. I look around for the old lady but I don't see her. All I need is for her to sit near me so we can hold hands as the plane goes down. I think I'm in the clear. It's after one A.M

and in the dim light of the coach I settle down to sleep, perchance to dream, but I know I won't. My seat is only a couple of rows behind the cockpit and stewardesses are busy in the galley or whatever that is. Occasionally, they or a crew member goes into or comes out of the cockpit and I hear the voices of the captain and crew before the door whooshes closed.

One of the stewardesses is talking to them with the door held open and I hear the captain or navigator tell her that there are storms over the mountains between here and Spokane and so it's likely to be a bumpy ride. "Announce to the passengers that we may experience turbulence but that they should not be concerned as the captain will attempt to skirt most of the storm." With that, she said something like, "Oh, great!" and let the door close. I quickly scan the seats once again in search of my melancholy dame. I don't see her, but that does nothing for my peace of mind. I remember the joke about a guy who was told he shouldn't be afraid to fly because "when it's your time, it's your time, and when it's not, it's not. No matter what the circumstances." He answers: "Yeah, but what if I'm on the plane with someone else whose time it is?"

I close my eyes as we accelerate down the runway. Even with the fear I feel, this is still pretty damned exciting. My very first flight was only three weeks ago when I flew home from San Antonio, Texas. That time, a really sweet stewardess noticed my nervousness and asked to hold my hand during take-off. Given the circumstances I had no choice but to be brave. But I wasn't prepared for the way it feels when the sensation of ground speed is replaced by one of floating as the plane leaves the ground. I thought we were going down and I may have squeezed her hand a bit harder. By now, I'm an old pro and I look forward to that exhilarating feeling. We leave mother earth nicely. I feel myself relax a bit and hope I can fall asleep soon. Maybe I can sleep through the turbulence.

It isn't as bad as we had been warned it might be. I look out the window as the plane banks and the moon is lighting up the snow on the mountains. For a few minutes I forget to be frightened; I enjoy the beauty and serenity of the scene below. Maybe the lady was wrong and took a different plane. Or maybe... *Try to get some sleep*, I tell myself. But everything: the flight, the prospect of my first posting, my loneliness, the image of my girlfriend crying at the gate, thoughts of my family celebrating Christmas Eve without me, keep me awake for a while longer. Then I sleep.

I wake to the sound of electronic chimes. I'm not dead, so I must have slept a little. The captain announces we are beginning our approach into Spokane International Airport. As he says this, I feel the plane begin its descent and I hear the engines change tune. I figure, so far, so good. In a few minutes we bank to my side and I look out again at fields of snow. Pinpricks of light, probably street lights interrupt the otherwise barren-looking snowscape. Before long I see that the street lights are joined by the lights of buildings and houses. I don't know why anyone would be up at this time but remember again it's Christmas Eve. Now I can see what appears to be a cluster of lights in the distance which I figure are from the airport. I put my head back as we once again straighten out and continue our descent. I realize now that I've shifted my focus from where I've been to where I'm going.

The air is cold, snow is on the ground and the airport terminal is almost as empty as the one I left in Portland. My instructions are to take a taxi to the air base, a distance of ten or so miles. The sight of a woebegone looking kid in an ill-fitting Air Force dress uniform must be an everyday occurrence around here because, once again, no one pays me the slightest bit of attention as I wander around collecting my gear. Well, one guy notices me: a cab driver. "Need a ride to the base?" he asks. "Yes, sir." I'm nervous enough to call the shoe shine boy "sir" at this point in my military career. "Right this way, Airman," he says. *That's me, the Airman*, I think.

The drive to the base takes about twenty minutes or so. I've never ridden in a cab, at least not when I've had to pay, so when he stops and unloads my stuff I pay him five dollars, enough to include a tip I hope. The Air Policeman at the gate looks at my orders and directs me toward a building about fifty yards away where I'm greeted by a couple of "old timers," Airmen 2nd class not much older than I am but with one stripe more. One of them processes my paperwork and then orders me to grab my gear and follow him to a truck. We stop at a barracks for guys who arrive but haven't been assigned yet to their units. There is a day room with four bunks. One is occupied by a kid from Camden, New Jersey. He talks with that strong Jersey accent slightly reminiscent of the New York sound of my youth in Rochester. I don't know why, but he tells me his religious background, one that doesn't include Christian holidays, maybe to head off any talk about how sad it is to be here in the wee hours of Christmas morning. There's a polite, unspoken understanding that we each have our own problems to deal with.

So, here I am, 1,200 miles from home, curled up under a U.S. Government-issue green wool blanket, and there's a nice kid from New "Joisey" in the next bunk. The plane ride wasn't all that bad. Now that I'm safely on the ground, I hope she was on my flight after all.

Bio- Sam Culotta lives in Southern California with his wife of fifty-three years. He holds a Bachelors Degree in English from California State University, Fullerton, CA. After retirement from a career in finance, he worked as a writing tutor in the Learning Center of a community college.

Culotta is the author of *Sleeping With Lumbago: Often Humorous, Always Personal Essays*, published in 2011, and *Family Suite*, a memoir of his and his wife's families, published in 2007.

The Piano Room

by Julia Peterman

The carpet is gold and soft. It holds the pattern left by the vacuum long after the vacuum has moved on—I'm the only one who goes in there on a regular basis, and I always walk the same path. The walls are forest green, dark and rich and comforting, the color of the leaves in the woods behind my house at the end of the summer, just before they turn red. If you look closely, you can see drips, tiny ones leftover from when my parents painted it. The paint is naturally bumpy, semi-gloss instead of flat, so that it's easier to clean. The room smells like Japanese Cherry Blossom, the scent of the moisturizer I keep in there, designating it as my space.

There are six windows, two on each exposed side of the room. They're tall; they go from a couple of feet off the floor to just below the top of the wall. The tops of the windows are arched. They're surrounded by gold-painted molding, which has four indents in it, each of which is the perfect size for one of my fingers now. My fingers were much smaller when I first saw the molding and was fascinated by something about it. Perhaps the perfect concavity of the indents, in spite of the fact that they had to be carved into the wood, or possibly just the beautifully dark gold color. I'd try and fit one finger into each indent, tucking my thumb into my palm, the way we were taught in ballet class, so that I could pretend my hands perfectly fit the molding, as if it were specifically molded to me, the way the room would

seem to be years later. The blinds are dark gold and covered with delicate flowery designs in green and brown. The top arch of the window isn't covered, rendering the blinds totally useless, but they're a nice touch.

There are two couches—one a two-seater, one a three-seater—and one reclining chair. All three are leather, a dark mahogany color that fits perfectly into the color scheme. The front of the armrests is outlined in round, gold studs. The couches are comfortable enough to sleep on, and have been used for that purpose in the past, for large sleepovers and long naps and my sister's boyfriends. A blanket sits at one end of the long couch and pillows sit at the other, waiting for the next person to come along and fall victim to the squishy cushions or a siren song befitting the room's name and real purpose.

The ceiling is vaulted and high, white with green squares to make the ceiling less intimidating. It rises towards the sky like the ceiling of a concert hall. There are three doors: one, plain, white, wooden, sits unobtrusively in a corner; the other two are a set, all panes of glass and white molding, acting as a frame for the baby grand piano that dominates the room.

That piano is mine.

I didn't pay for it, I didn't ask for it—I didn't even really need it. But, it's mine.

It's an Otto Altenburg, and it was already old when we bought it secondhand. It looks like cherrywood, but I could be mistaken; I certainly didn't ask the man we bought it from. At the time, I'd only memorized half a song, and had no idea why my mom was bothering to buy it when we had a marginally functional upright piano at home. Then again, the etchings on the piano (*Julia hates Miss A... Sarah hates Miss A... I'm bored... I hate piano*) might have been cause enough to get rid of it, even if it hadn't reached a point in its life when the piano tuner looked at it, shrugged, and told us to stop calling him. The new piano, though, this was something to be proud of.

Within a week of its placement in this room, it had attained the nickname "my baby," placing it at the same level as my laptop, my books, and my dogs. Although I got it while in high school, the loudest and worst time of my life, it somehow managed to create a sound I could handle, a sound that blocked out all the rest of the noise.

I played every day. In my sophomore year of high school, I memorized Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." I played it, over and over and over again, until I could play it with my eyes closed, until I could drift off mid-song and wake up as I was finishing it. It swirled through my head, like the musical counterpart to *Starry Night*, all swirls of light in the darkness, all soft and easy on the senses. Every song I memorized was like that: I would sit down at the piano and play for hours, the song floating through my head on repeat, unstopably bulldozing every other thought in my head until even my breath synced up with the rise and fall of the notes in my brain. The keys became familiar to me in a way my own face wasn't. I could close my eyes and put my fingers down, and know where I was and how far my hands needed to move before they reached the starting key of one of my songs. I knew which keys stuck, and I knew how to use the pedal so that no one else would ever know. I knew which key was chipped, and I knew which one was scratched.

My piano became part of my family. It was important to me: in a house full of grating voices, in a time full of shrieking sounds, my piano spoke sweetly, spoke kindly, spoke softly. My piano spoke a language I understood, a wordless language in which it didn't matter if I spoke the wrong word. And when my mouth forgot my words, my fingers remembered my voice. But, of course, it didn't only speak to me—it spoke to the rest of my family, too.

At first, I'd come out of the room to find my dogs sitting in the next room, blinking at me like they were surprised I'd stopped playing. Then, I'd open the doors to find out that my mom had joined the dogs. And then, my dog Axl began whining at me to let him in. My mom insisted that the doors stay closed so that we'd have one room the dogs hadn't ruined. I insisted that the doors stay closed so that humidity couldn't get in and ruin my baby. However, considering the fact that Axl was also my baby, the doors ultimately stayed open while I played. Axl would come in and sit to my right. Sometimes he'd bark, and it would resonate with one of the strings, and he'd stare at the piano and bark some more, wondering why this wooden creature was speaking to him.

Now, my other dog, Z, joins us sometimes, usurping Axl's place and asserting her position as First-and-Therefore-Most-Important-Dog. My mom joins us on bad days. My dad comes running when he recognizes a song. My older sister yells requests from the kitchen. My younger sister informed me once that my "creepy song" gave her nightmares, although I

never actually figured out what song it was. My extended family piles in during the holidays, disturbing the peace and silence, insisting that I play.

Most of the time, though, it's just me and my piano in that room, the room that fills with graceful, harsh, speechless, vocal, quiet, loud music. It's just the room that returns noise to me like a gift. Just that.

Bio- J. Peterman is a senior English major at Villanova University. She enjoys reading and writing so much that it was the only thing to which she could imagine devoting her college experience. When her nose isn't buried in a book, it can usually be found buried in sheet music instead.

Editor's Note: This story is excerpted from a forthcoming collection of memoirs and was kept to its original length. The story is a journey in a number of ways—a literal journey to visit Poland, an edifying journey back in time to one of the darkest chapters in history, and the internal journey of one individual simply trying to "comprehend the incomprehensible" after taking a tour of Auschwitz. We experience the role of the observer as though we too are walking through the tour, learning much we didn't know, and the writer's shock and depth of feeling become our own. Through its historical detail about unthinkable circumstances and impossible decisions, the story invites us to look within and without at this pivotal point in the present—"a caution against the indifference we as the human race, cannot afford." Driven by a photograph that remains unexplained, it is about discovering those keys which open the doors to the past.

Photographic Memory

by Patrick Byrne

It is rare in life to experience something that indelibly imprints a mark on your conscience and challenges your understanding of who you are as a human being. Seldom does a person seek out such a life shaping experience, but rather they are chosen by circumstance or an implausible and unexpected occurrence. Such an occurrence chose me over a decade ago and continues to call me back to that autumn day I visited Auschwitz—the most infamous and lethal Nazi concentration camp of WWII.

I have struggled many times to capture in writing what occurred back then but the words never seemed to fall into place. However, each time I tried to abandon the effort, something always awakened thoughts that refuse to

stay dormant. Recently, I happened to catch part of the landmark film, *Schindler's List*, on television. I've seen the film a number of times and its depiction of the horrors of Auschwitz, prompts recollections of my visit as I imagine it does for any who've experienced going there.

Yet this time, a particular segment, one of its most famed sequences that triggers viewer associations by a single color, served as a reminder about the central, mystifying reason that fuels my obligation to share my experience. It all boils down to what I hold to be a personal truth: history is people—not a place, an event, or even an object over its owner. When we put a face to something, we understand it, and *that's* what inspires us.

In the film there is a pivotal moment for Oskar Schindler when he eyes an innocent child in a red coat moving silently across a black and white screen depicting the extermination of Jews in Krakow, Poland. Later, in a disturbing scene, Schindler observes her lifeless body still clad in her red coat strewn on a cart of the dead. Circumstance chooses a reluctant Schindler, attacking his conscience and sense of humanity, ultimately leading him to abandon his pursuit of wealth as a munitions manufacturer for the German army and become obsessed with saving as many Jewish lives as possible at great personal risk.

Witnessing the scenes of the girl in the red coat ignited memories of an incident I experienced at the Auschwitz museum involving the image of a red shoe I mysteriously captured in a photo that day. It has always been puzzling and a source of bewilderment that continues to draw me back to that unforgettable place. The red shoe now vivid in my mind beckoned me to go look again as I had so many times before.

Reluctantly, I began the task of foraging through a stack of storage boxes from our recent move. After an hour of wrestling heavy boxes, the contents mislabeled in undecipherable magic marker, I spotted the album I was seeking in a box of binders from other notable trips that year. Flipping through the plastic pages of travel photos, my mind became distracted and I almost paged past that bewildering image of a small child's red shoe in a place it could not be.

The bins I photographed that day at the museum housed disturbing collections of human hair, artificial limbs, suitcases, eyeglasses, and spent gas canisters of Zyklon B—what was deemed by the Nazi's as the most efficient method for implementing the Final Solution, i.e. the extermination

of the Jewish people. Each exhibit I photographed elicited a different sense of outrage and sadness; however, the most powerful moment came when I was standing before an enclosure piled high with thousands of shoes.

At the bottom of the bin against the glass my eyes were drawn to one red shoe, in a largely colorless mass, belonging to a young child. It acted as a beacon and drew me closer. I was fixated. If I'd breezed by it, I might've been able to dismiss it. I was very close to tears as I imagined the terror of that particular child. I had to move away to avoid shedding tears in public.

In my family, men are very guarded about sharing their deep personal emotions. I have two uncles who saw action in WWII. One flew combat missions as a bomber pilot over Europe, the other earned a Purple Heart in the Battle of the Bulge under General George Patton. Neither spoke of their war time experiences, but I learned from their children that it had a lasting impact on their lives.

Thus, for a number of reasons, I took no photograph of the bin containing the shoes.

It was several weeks later, when my photos from the trip were developed, when I discovered, somehow visible on the outer glass enclosure of a massive bin of confiscated eyeglasses, the suggested image of a solitary red shoe. It appeared as though it was resting prominently at the forefront of the tangled collection of spectacles. But how? I know there must be a plausible explanation, but I was told by the film processor and a professional photographer it is not a double exposure and the possibility that it was caused by a reflection from the nearby encasement of shoes is unlikely.

I sat staring again in wonder at the photo still trying to understand how it could have appeared. For the first time, I realized I no longer cared how it got there. Suddenly, for me, this individual shoe had become a symbol of the many thousands of innocent children that perished in this nightmare place and time in history.

The great sense of relief was quickly replaced with a sense of obligation to this child I had never known but who, through her message of the red shoe, I felt somehow wanted me to honor and memorialize those lost by sharing all I felt and observed as someone bearing witness to Auschwitz. I thought it would be presumptuous to even write about it—but I'm realizing that my

perspective is not meant to join the ranks of other interpretations. It is just my attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible.

This unlikely journey began as I was accompanying my wife Patty on a business/pleasure excursion (business for her, pleasure for me), to Krakow, Poland with follow up visits to St. Petersburg and Moscow, before returning home to St. Louis, Mo. Patty was President of an international real estate organization which afforded us an opportunity for yearlong travel throughout the globe.

Krakow is a beautiful city with historic landmarks heralding many great achievements of the Polish people throughout the centuries. It was a crisp fall evening as Patty and I strolled along the Vistula River in the heart of the city. She casually asked about my plans for the following day while she attended an endless stream of conferences. I explained I was scheduled to take the bus tour to Auschwitz, a short ride from the city. Then, after a pause in a very soft, almost cautionary tone, she told me I would return from the experience a different person. Patty had visited Dachau, another of the notorious death camps several years earlier in Germany.

I did not fully realize the true depth of her remark until the evening after returning from my soul searching visit to the camp, an experience that remains with me until this day. I was also unaware of how I would later come to discover further layers of meaning recounting it.

The idea of getting to visit Auschwitz, was like being given a chance to walk through the past. Initially I was going for the historical perspective, knowing I'd be affected, but not expressly going with the purpose of being shocked or changed. Since college, I've had a strong interest in WWII. It wasn't a purely academic outlook, but I felt like it would be a study of history.

Stepping off the bus that day at Auschwitz, I paused to gaze at the imposing words framed in arched steel above the infamous gate, boldly proclaiming to all, *ARBEIT MACHT FREI* (work sets you free). For the thousands of innocent victims entering there, that was a greeting to the portal of hell. There was an aura to the place. Once you step off that bus, you know—people know—it is another realm altogether. For me, I felt as though I was passing into an eerie netherworld that was hard to describe. The outside world now seemed far off as if I had fallen into this notorious

chapter of history, unsure of what to expect next, and my anxiety mounted by the minute.

The noisy crowds on the bus were silent now, speaking only in whispers if at all. This was not unique to my group, that same silence permeated the many diversified clusters of tourists making their way to our first stop—an orientation film. I especially noticed two separate groups. One appeared to be in their mid to late teens, the other slightly older. I learned later the teenage group was comprised of Polish high school students from Krakow fulfilling their graduation requirement to visit Auschwitz. The other older group waved a flag of Israel in a slow reverent motion, as if in silent tribute to those Jews who perished here.

How strange it seemed, almost surreal so many young people moving about in self-imposed silence. Moments prior, I'd passed through the gates with great unease. Then, through the reverence displayed by these young people I gained a sense of calm and peace, one that briefly diminished the foreboding atmosphere that hangs in the air there.

The silence of the crowd continued into the theater and throughout the duration of the orientation film. As the groups filed out, their facial expressions gave away emotions they were able to cloak in the darkness of the theater. Although I am sure we had all braced ourselves for an assault on our senses, the enormity of the crimes played out on the screen that morning was a powerful shock—and an example of what lay ahead on the tour.

The main camp, Auschwitz 1, is foremost in my mind and represents one of my clearest recollections from that day. After viewing the museum exhibits which included my encounter with the red shoe, our tour was led down the street and through a wooden entry gate to a large courtyard lined by two brick buildings. On the left, Block 10 and on the right, Block 11. At the end closing off the courtyard and connecting the two Blocks, was the Black Wall or "Wall of Death." The Wall was so named because the Nazi's had to erect a portable black granite wall to protect the integrity of the existing brick wall from the volume of gunfire damage caused by firing squads during the execution of 20,000 victims. The Black Wall is the most visible horror that resides in this compound of bricks and mortar.

Behind the barred and blacked out windows of Block 11 were cells of torture and murder. Four of the cells were designated as "standing cells." No

imagination is needed to comprehend what misery and pain victims suffered when placed in enclosures less than 32 inches square. There was no light, no heat, no cooling, barely enough air to breathe, and only room to stand on a floor caked in excrement. If the snow in the winter was heavy, it blocked the small air holes into the cell, frequently resulting in death from suffocation to the occupant.

The thought of death by suffocation in a confined space was particularly agonizing for me to contemplate given my claustrophobic fears. It reminded me of a childhood event when older boys forced me into a steel trash can and sat on the lid so there was no escape. After banging and screaming, I could not breathe. I was finally released, but I have never forgotten the terror of total confinement and lack of air.

There was another group of notorious cells in Block 11 known as the “starvation cells.” Here, prisoners were confined without food or water until they died. In Cell 18, a Polish priest, Maximilian Kolbe, was starved and finally murdered for offering his life in exchange for another prisoner. Years later, reading excerpts from *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, I was reminded that the message of one segment of the writing was that mankind’s finest hour is sometimes seen in the hatred and madness of war. It is the personification of this quote from the King James Bible: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

I am sure Kolbe’s life-giving act was repeated many times in many different ways during WWII and all the wars since. In my own experience, I lost a dear friend who sacrificed his life in Vietnam to save the lives of countless fellow marines, for which he was awarded the Silver Star.

We then approached Block 10—an ominous looking building, all the windows having been sealed with black wooden boards, making it impossible to see inside. Further adding to the foreboding appearance were two upright steel poles set in the pavement immediately in front of the building for the purpose of hanging “troublesome” prisoners with their arms tied behind their backs. The building is closed to the public.

This is the hospital where Josef Mengele also known as Dr. Death and/or the Angel of Death, performed his grisly surgical experiments focused on his maniacal genetic fascination with hereditary variables, especially twins. All doctors at Auschwitz were assigned a shift of assisting with sorting

human cargo at the incoming trains. The Nazi's built a ramp alongside the tracks to expedite the "selection process." This was the term used to determine who would live to work or those who would be immediately sent to the gas chamber. Mengele seemed to delight in this assignment and was frequently observed at the debarkation area when off duty, not wanting to miss an opportunity to locate more specimens for his gruesome work.

Children, young twins, were often the objects of selection for medical experimentation. This personification of evil was well-known for putting children at ease, allowing him greater control to perform his hideous experiments. Families were torn apart and some had to decide whether their children, if not selected outright, should die with them or whether they should offer their twins to an unknown fate hoping they might survive whatever lay ahead. Most would be spotted, never to see their parents again. As a father, I can only imagine the screaming and fear of my daughter and son being ripped away from the arms of their mother and I, to almost certain suffering and death.

I was walking along, thinking, *I could be walking in the very footsteps of Mengele—one of the most evil people who ever lived.* Just the thought of association by occupying the same space was unnerving.

The final stop at Auschwitz 1 was the gas chamber and crematoria. What struck me was that they were situated just yards from the villa of the Camp Commandant Rudolph Hoess, where Hoess' own family lived and his children played. I wondered what they saw. Did the girl in the red shoe pass here on her way to eternity? Did she see Hoess' children? Did they see her?

There is so much we can never know for sure about what was seen and felt, but it is certain Rudolph Hoess, as indicated by the recorded statements I'd read of his war crimes trial, saw thousands of doomed children pass by. In the deposition, he speaks about expressing views to Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Final Solution: "I often felt weakened at having to push hundreds of screaming, pleading children into the gas chamber. I did, however always feel ashamed of this weakness of mine after I talked to Adolf Eichmann.

"Eichmann explained to me that it was especially the children who have to be killed first, because where was the logic in killing a generation of older people and leaving alive a generation of young people who can be possible

avengers of their parents and constitute a new biological cell for the reemerging of this people.”

It is hard for me to imagine a more monstrous conversation ever taking place in human history. When we witness or are aware of horrible crimes on an adult level, we can somehow find a way to deal with them better—when children are involved, however, when it gets to that level, it becomes so base, it can’t get any lower. The impact of it takes on a whole new dimension of inhumanity. What I found to be perhaps the most stunning aspect of Hoess’ admissions, was how they revealed that the systematic destruction of the lives of children, was a logical and desirable governmental objective of the Third Reich. It was considered a normal, routine process—nothing more than an unpleasant task.

I felt it fitting to learn that Hoess received his worldly justice on April 16, 1947 when he was hung just yards from his villa and the crematoria where the thousands he murdered passed by on their way to martyrdom.

Years after my visit to Auschwitz I had the great pleasure of working with Whitney Harris. Harris was a young Navy lawyer in 1945 who spent three days interviewing Hoess and conducting his deposition which contained much of the evidence needed to condemn him to death for his actions as Commandant of Auschwitz.

At the time of our first introduction, I was serving as chairman of the board for a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of those afflicted with mental illness, and fundraising was always a pressing concern. Whitney, without any prodding became a generous benefactor and his tireless efforts secured much needed financial support for the organization.

He was an elegant gentleman of immense integrity and until his death in 2010, at the age of 97, he fought for justice as one of the founding members of the International Criminal Court. His book *Tyranny on Trial: The Evidence at Nuremberg* was described by the *New York Times* as the “first complete historic and legal analysis of the Nuremberg trial” and “a book of importance.” Whitney Harris was a giving and caring man, and it was my great privilege to have known him.

Our guide now directed us to the buses for the two mile ride to Auschwitz II-better known as Birkenau. The entry to the camp for prisoners stacked in

rail cars is known as the "Gate of Death." The train tracks ended a few yards from two of the four gas chambers and four crematoriums. Several of the original box cars to transport the Jews to their death are still positioned on the tracks.

Two of the four gas chambers and crematoriums were built below ground with only the smoke stacks that belched human ash day and night protruding above the surface. Now only piles of rubble remain of these death houses to remind the world of the depravity practiced here on a scale unequalled in the history of mankind.

I later learned that rubble from one of the crematoriums that I viewed that day was the result of explosions set off by an organized revolt of the Sonderkommandos—camp prisoners, mainly Jewish, recruited (else be killed or commit suicide) into helping with the disposal of the bodies of victims. It got me thinking about the mental anguish of being in such a position. I had to know more about this group that was predominantly scorned and sometimes sympathized with, playing a role, albeit a forced one, in the gruesome function of the camp. I read of how thousands of victims each day descended into the chambers, being reassured by these fellow prisoners that they were being sent to showers for cleansing and delousing purposes. It was only after being stripped of their clothing and herded into the gas chambers they realized their fate. Next, the Sonderkommandos had the repulsive task of loading the dead on trolley carts where the bodies were then moved to the ovens for incineration. Yet though they were treated slightly better than the average camp worker to be kept strong for efficiency, few of them survived as the Nazi's did not want anyone to know the scope of their war crimes.

They periodically killed the Sonderkommandos, replacing them as new youthful candidates arrived on trains. Those that did survive were shunned by the other survivors, though death was the only escape or alternative. A number used their role to gather evidence of the genocide (notes, photos), and those at Auschwitz who staged the revolt in '44 used what weapons they could gather to destroy buildings and strike at the SS, organizing defiance from within.

It is easy to understand the conflicting views these men received but I have often thought of what my choice would be in the same situation. I would like to think I would choose the option of death rather than compliance. However, they were not informed of the nature of what their work would

entail before it began, and our instincts for survival are incredibly powerful. After sober and honest reflection, I had to admit to myself that I would have chosen to live, even under barbaric conditions hoping somehow to assist the condemned or find some way to resist or fight the evil. There are questions we hope we never have to know the answers to and much of history is painted gray with situations we can't possibly fathom.

As we continued our walk through the camp observing ruins of the gas chambers and crematoriums, I inquired of the guide where the remains of many of the victims are buried. The guide, pointing to a grove of trees in the distance, said "over there, but we do not go there—it is sacred ground." Somehow in the gloom of that gray October day, the cool air carried the familiar fragrance of autumn leaves.

If only momentarily, it seemed as though the haunting presence of the evil that took place there was replaced by a kind of sanctity. It was as if those sacrificed were saying this is not the place for thoughts of rancor or revenge, but, as I imagined the owner of the red shoe imparting to me, for bearing witness to hatred that must never again be allowed to create another Auschwitz.

In reacquainting myself with certain details of the camp via the website for this story, I have since learned that a few of the areas are now designated as memorial sites and open to visitors. The sites are known as the ash ponds and were used by the Nazi's for disposing, as the name suggests the ashes of their victims.

I now ask myself, resting in the ashes of these pools, are minds there that held the cure for deadly diseases? Are there scientific discoveries that could have eliminated starvation, pestilence and misery for future generations? Given what extraordinary things came of the fine minds of survivors, invaluable tomes on psychology, philosophy, science, the societal contributions of Nobel prize winners, one can imagine what further greatness might have come of the minds lost.

We continued at a much quicker pace now, hardly slowing as we viewed several rows of crudely constructed wooden barracks. The original structures had long since been destroyed or torn down and replaced with a small group of reconstructed replicas on a large site where once vast numbers of the shed-like buildings housed the workers.

As the tour moved on, I paused to ponder the wretched living conditions the prisoners must have endured: extreme temperatures—freezing in the winter, sweltering in the summer—no privacy, and personal hygiene impossible. Some of the most basic human needs went unmet. These individuals who were turned into half starved skeletons, were worked relentlessly under the watchful eyes of the German guards until they died of sickness or disease or until their lack of usefulness condemned them to the gas chamber.

For me, the pace to the gate and the bus could not be fast enough as I hurried to catch up to the tour. I had reached my threshold of tolerance for what I had witnessed that day—but even in my haste to leave, I had to turn and take one last look at a place that has never completely left my thoughts.

Stepping on the bus for the return trip to Krakow it was evident the visit had deeply impacted the mood of our group. The tourists who chatted noisily on the morning ride from the city were now somber and only murmured in low tones. The heavy weight of what they had observed was clearly visible by the way they moved about—as if in slow motion.

Before I went to Auschwitz, I either didn't fully grasp or fully connect to what had happened. Now, I get it. It's not just a historical event. That doesn't do justice to it. It had been an emotional tour with a historical background. There's a significant difference between placing it within the context of WWII, and isolating what happened there, examining the everyday heroism, suffering, death and evil that was routine. Auschwitz/Birkenau is a place that exists apart from the everyday world.

As I stared out the window at the gaily painted farm cottages adorned with brightly colored flowers in window boxes and gardens, I asked myself whether the people living here in the Polish countryside during the Holocaust fully realized the extent of the atrocities in the so-called work camps.

I recently researched the content of Commandant Rudolph Hoess' deposition in greater depth, seeking insight into what nearby villagers may have known about the true purpose of the camp. The answer was there in a clearly stated admission by Hoess: "We were required to carry out these exterminations in secrecy but of course the foul and nauseating stench from the continuous burning of bodies permeated the entire area and all people

living in the surrounding communities knew that exterminations were going on at Auschwitz."

It is impossible for me to grasp how daily life could be conducted in the villages and farms with ash laden clouds hovering above and a fetid odor in the air day and night. How did the people explain to their children why they must come indoors to play on days when the air was too sickening to breathe? Did they constantly wash and rewash the food from their gardens to insure no ash remained? Near the end of the war when the Nazi's burned bodies in open pits at night, I imagine the villagers could see the glow of fires from their windows and porches.

Once the war was over and the death camps liberated, General Dwight Eisenhower with what I deem as brilliant foresight, ordered all available military personnel to personally view the horror of the camps. In addition, I appreciate the wisdom of his decision to order thousands of feet of film to be taken to document the indescribable scenes so that no one could ever claim these events did not take place.

Arriving back in Krakow, the noise and activity of the city was a welcome relief from the unnatural quiet of the camp visit and helped me to restore some sense of normalcy that all but vanished the moment I entered Auschwitz. I had no trouble admitting to my wife that she was right—I did return from the tour a different person and just as that evolution has continued in the writing of this story, so too has our conversation about it that has taken place over a span of years.

In the continued aim of furthering open conversation, I have a twenty-one-year-old granddaughter and I have detailed my experiences in Poland with her on more than one occasion, accompanied by the photos. On a larger scale, I think that is part of what we owe to the past—conversation in the present, a deep dialogue that stays open, so as to influence a greater future. Beyond the tour itself, I embarked on an extensive quest for information to fill in broad strokes and talked about my reactions to what I had discovered. I spoke this story before I wrote it down; that was the way I had to do it, to dig deep, attain understanding, and get at the core of what I cared deeply about.

I learned many lessons on the difficult and seemingly endless journey of capturing and processing what I had witnessed that day as well as through the subsequent research so I could assemble a coherent depiction of the

incredible human depravity and ultimate triumph of the human spirit that is Auschwitz. Just as I equate history with people, I feel it is a collection of voices—voices that utter unspeakable words as with Hoess and voices of hope and truth lighting the way for future generations.

One of those voices, silent, though no less powerful in speaking its message, entered into my life and is captured in a still image. I hold the unexplained photograph depicting a glimpse of a child's red shoe—what became a kind of talisman for me to be able to access my personal emotional perspectives about that visit. I had been struck by that specific red shoe and trying to turn from my emotions, chose not to photograph it. Its likeness appearing on the glass surface of a bin of items I did photograph caused it to become the mystifying impetus to depict my visit. This was the most difficult piece I've ever had to write, but I felt as though I was being guided.

Subsequent trips to Israel in the years following our time in Poland, and particularly, viewing the grave of Oskar Schindler in Jerusalem, reminded me reflection is not enough! There is a message that has to be continually imparted to each generation. *We Can Never Forget*. A crime on that scale is a crime against all humanity.

Indifference or ignorance left unchallenged poses a great risk. With the recent passing of Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, writer, instructor and Holocaust survivor, I re-read many of his quotes, and this one in particular is a caution against the indifference we as the human race, cannot afford: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." Both the survivors and those whose lives were lost, speak volumes in the legacies they lived and left behind if we're wise enough to listen.

Bio- Patrick Byrne is a retired businessman currently residing in Delray Beach, Florida. Previous stories have appeared in *The Write Place at the Write Time* under 'Our Stories' non-fiction. The narratives have centered on his time in the U.S. Navy as a young man in the early 1960s. He and his wife Patty enjoy travel and still participate in triathlon races having completed three full Ironman distance competitions. A recent trip to Ecuador included hiking in the volcanic mountains near Quito the capital city and scuba diving off the Galapagos Islands.

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