

# *Hope Till Hope Creates*

KARL KIRCHWEY

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THE UNCLE for whom I am named, my father's younger brother by two years, was a Navy fighter pilot flying off the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* in World War II. He was a lieutenant (junior grade) killed at the age of twenty-two during the first day of the invasion of the island of Saipan, in the Northern Marianas. He was a member of Fighting Squadron Ten, called "The Grim Reapers," the logo for which was a skeleton in a steep dive wearing a flying helmet and goggles, holding a blood-stained scythe. On 15 June 1944, his plane was shot down by Japanese antiaircraft fire—or it may have been brought down by friendly fire from a US Navy ship bombarding the island—and crashed into the sea. His body was never recovered. He was, according to the usual custom, listed as missing for a year, and then he was declared dead. He died twelve years before I was born, but he has paid me posthumous visits every fifteen or twenty years. His present visit may be his last, for although he lives now in a world beyond time, I do not.

My paternal grandmother, who read widely and was a pianist and a gifted watercolorist, briefly kept a journal specifically about my uncle. There is a punctuality to the last two years of my uncle's life: he began flight training in June of 1942; he received home leave in June of 1943; he was killed in June of 1944. My grandmother records his departure from home leave in an entry dated 18 June 1943:

It is over at last, the moment so much dreaded, the ordeal so long looked forward to. Each moment takes him further away from me. . . . And I must remain, powerless to help except through the wordless prayer that tears itself out of every mother's heart when her child is in danger.

No doubt it is unfair to judge this routine melodrama, since it was recorded in a private journal. She continues,

It would have been easier to bear if he had not kissed me as he did. We had luncheon together . . . and light talk of this and that to cover up the things that no words could say. . . . He had on his khaki uniform, which so much enhanced the grace and strength of his youth.

Here the narrative moves beyond cliché and into stranger territory. The register is not that of a mother; it is that of a lover, and the dynamic of the luncheon seems to be one of delicious erotic delay. My grandmother's first marriage, to my uncle's father (my paternal grandfather), had ended in divorce in 1930. Her second marriage, to a man named Abram Darst Wilt (known by his initials A.D.), was also fraught. A.D. was reputed to lie down on the ground and bark like a dog when he got into a rage. Both my father and my uncle begged my grandmother to leave him, but she never did.

Perhaps the transference of my grandmother's romantic affection to one of her two sons was inevitable. It does seem that my uncle was universally well-liked, an intelligent, humorous person. A friend of his, a Marine Corps captain named Frank Kemp who had participated in the occupation of the island of Guam that followed Saipan, wrote to my grandmother in September of 1944,

He was one of the finest men I knew. His open-hearted friendliness, wonderful sense of humor, and his kindness will always be remembered. Sometimes it is very difficult to understand the Almighty's scheme of things.

In any case, my grandmother's set piece of farewell moves toward its climax:

At length his train . . . was announced. "Mother," he said, "I think we had better say goodbye here rather than at the train," and then, gently but with an authoritative strength he put his arms around me and pressed his lips to mine and for long oblivious moments held me thus, our two souls communing with each other.

One wonders whether my uncle, aware of the extravagance of his mother's feelings, attempted a bit of stage-managing in Pennsylvania



Ensign Karl W. Kirchwey Jr.,  
US Naval Reserve, 1943.  
Courtesy of the author.

Station, to avoid a scene played out on the platform before an audience aboard the waiting train. And he seems to be providing the “strength” she requires of him at that time. She continues,

And as might happen to the drowning, the dearness of his youth was brought home to me, the treasure beyond price that was his babyhood and childhood. . . the joy and fellowship in beautiful things, the hours of Mozart and Beethoven, the other partings and reunions, all rushing together into this culminating moment when the world fell away. Then I heard him say “I will come back to you, Mother” and somehow I managed to say through my disgraceful tears “I know you will.”

This epiphany feels balanced between melodrama and authenticity, perhaps because it was written a year *before* my uncle was listed as

missing in action. That “culminating moment when the world fell away” suggests that my grandmother was in need of such a moment long before this particular farewell. The “hours of Mozart and Beethoven” may be an exaggeration, although my uncle did play violin in the college orchestra, and my grandmother’s father was a music teacher. The promised return feels charged with the possibility that neither of the protagonists actually believes in it. (Later, my grandmother would write to a friend that both she and my uncle knew, at this parting, that they were seeing each other for the last time.) The child is gone, in his place a man

made perfect in manliness and understanding, in all respects worthy of my love and pride. Nothing of what he is can be lost for it will live in me forever.

The echo of Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in that last line is unmistakable, though my grandmother may not have been thinking of it, nor of the echoes of the New Testament in her conclusion:

It is for me to be worthy, now, of him, who has gone from me a little while, and yet can never go. I will remember, and think on these things.

Clearly my grandmother believes that this farewell, this encounter with someone entirely good, has the potential to change her perspective on the rest of her life.



Given this intensity of feeling, it is not surprising that my uncle’s loss triggered an aftermath of haunted longing in my grandmother. Her journal includes a passage from Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*:

To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent...  
This is alone Life. . . .

And indeed she lived for some time in a state of mingled grief and expectation. The first notification she had received about my uncle provided no closure and no details. It was a telegram dated 11 July 1944 that misspelled his surname:

THE NAVY DEPARTMENT DEEPLY REGRETS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON LIEUTENANT (JG) KARL WENDELL KIRCHNWEY JR USNR IS MISSING FOLLOWING ACTION IN THE PERFORMANCE OF HIS DUTY AND IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY. THE DEPARTMENT APPRECIATES YOUR GREAT ANXIETY BUT DETAILS NOT NOW AVAILABLE AND DELAY IN RECEIPT THEREOF MUST NECESSARILY BE EXPECTED. TO PREVENT POSSIBLE AID TO OUR ENEMIES PLEASE DO NOT DIVULGE THE NAME OF HIS SHIP OR STATION = VICE ADMIRAL RANDALL JACOBS THE CHIEF OF NAVAL PERSONNEL

In fact the details had already been provided in a letter dated 10 July 1944 by my uncle's squadron commander, Lieutenant Commander Roland W. Schumann Jr., though my grandmother cannot have received this letter until sometime after the telegram. And in it, Commander Schumann's task is to provide closure by gently ruling out the possibility of my uncle's being still alive:

The nature of the flight was hazardous, as the planes were over enemy territory at a low altitude. As the flight made a turn over the beach . . . Karl's wingman . . . saw an anti-aircraft shell explode close to Karl's plane. The plane swerved and went into a dive, striking the water about a mile from shore. The other planes were not able to follow Karl down at once but the pilots are sure he did not get out of the plane. When the area of the crash was searched, there was no trace of a life raft or survivor . . . I would like to say that there is some hope for his recovery but only through a miracle could he be alive today. I hope you agree that knowing just what happened is better than having the uncertainty facing you.

Commander Schumann's report is confirmed subsequently by another pilot, Peter Shonk, who was flying with my uncle that day:

The details of his being shot down were obscured partially by the fact that his wing man only saw the plane get hit. He did not see it crash, but we believe that he went in in a split second. Apparently, the burst of anti-aircraft that struck him was a lucky shot entirely for the Japs [*sic*], we had all been flying low over the island because most of their resistance had been smashed from the air by this time. Karl had come through some other tight scrapes on numerous occasions and it was just the unruly hand of fate that made this his last flight. (to Karl's mother, 20 August 1944)

Even with many of the costliest battles of the Pacific War still ahead, Pete Shonk correctly identifies the ruthless actuarial game going on. If this war was daunting for pilots at the very least, for combat soldiers on the ground it was almost impossible. Before the invasion of Okinawa in April of 1945, the amphibious assault troops were told that casualties during the initial invasion might run as high as eighty-five percent, and “they knew now that they were playing the law of averages, with life and death a matter of blind luck,” as Ian Toll writes in *Twilight of the Gods*.



I'm not sure my grandmother *did* agree that knowledge was better than uncertainty. For reasons having to do with the unhappiness of her life even preceding my uncle's death, she clung to that uncertainty. She embroidered it as sea creatures would a sunken human thing. And eventually she built a kind of coral palace, a cult, in my uncle's memory. I have a draft of her letter of response—possibly never sent—to Commander Schumann, dated 23 August 1944. She writes,

You were quite right in feeling that we would rather know all the facts than to delude ourselves with impossible hopes. The parents of all fliers constantly face the possibility that has now struck home to us as fact, and we would be less than worthy of our sons if we did not accept with fortitude and humility the sacrifice they have so unhesitatingly made.



Helen Jervis (Kirchwey) Wilt, n.d.  
Courtesy of the author.

This puts a brave face on her loss, a public face, but her journal records a different experience. On Sunday, 13 August 1944, she writes,

I had been particularly heavy-hearted all day—it seemed that Karl's loss could not be borne and the tears constantly came. After supper—we. . . were gasping with the continued heat + drought—I lay on the couch reading a mystery story. Suddenly—in the midst of a sentence—at about 9:15—my heart suddenly leaped with a strange joy and hope—it simply flooded into my soul it seemed to me that Karl was somehow miraculously still alive, in spite of all I could tell myself to the contrary. How foolish I am to write that—but I promised myself that whenever these strange impressions came to me, to record them just as they happened. *Ça y est* [That's it].

Again the question of the intended audience for these writings comes to mind: and if for herself only, then one wonders whether there is not a sort of self-daring quality to the proceedings, a narcissistic fascination, as well as the suggested impulse to record objectively the stages of grief and mourning. Clearly my grandmother pondered this episode for months. In a postscript dated “Later—January 31, 45,” she adds:

Now that I know of AD’s experience [her second husband seems to have dreamed of my uncle], perhaps it was that Karl came to me and was with me in spirit, so that I was aware of it and knew that he lives and can never die.

My grandmother learned to live with “knowing what happened,” but she sought visionary reassurance. She records an encounter with the young woman whom my uncle might have married had he returned from the Pacific:

Martha Ann [Gans], when I talked with her on December 20 ’44. . . was sure that he still lives, in the flesh, by some miracle that only Karl would experience. She did not merely argue to convince herself—she was sure, with a calm and utter certainty that was extraordinary.

That phrase “in the flesh” is indeed extraordinary. I have never been able to believe in a fleshly resurrection for anyone but Christ. Though I am an agnostic, I strive to be persuaded by the idea of a spiritual resurrection, or a spiritual afterlife, available to all. It seems to me that the idea of a bodily resurrection is a sort of torment for the human imagination, like the idea of chastity.

My grandmother’s vision of 13 August 1944 had at least two sequels. In an entry dated “November 30, 1944, 7 AM” she writes at length:

Last night before going to bed I thought long of Karl and besought him to come to me, to make himself known to me to assure me that he lives and loves. And for the first time since he was lost I



dreamed of him. He came back, wearing the brown gabardine suit he liked best, and he took me in his arms and kissed me long and joyfully and we rejoiced. He was radiant, his eyes shining with light. He sat down gaily as of old, and stayed with us a long while.

The eros of the relationship between mother and son is still present, but the uncanniness of the moment, even in a dream, is revealed by physical hints such as those shining eyes. Surely the power of this moment derives in part from the idea that the dead can respond to our prayers, though the reassurance longed for by my grandmother does not specify whether my uncle “lives and loves” in this world or another one. She continues,

I made haste to prepare dinner for him as we talked. Karl went out of the room for something and I remember asking AD if he thought it was Karl in person or, as I had assumed up to that time, his spiritual presence. AD said nonsense, of course it is Karl, he was rescued. As he said this, I was aware of Karl outside the door, as if he heard us and were a slightest bit reproachful that we should wonder or care whether it were his spiritual or his bodily presence.

The impatience of the dreamed Karl with the understandable human need to differentiate between the physical and the metaphysical does seem Christ-like. My grandmother concludes her account:

Then I woke up. But I felt drowned in blessedness and the assurance that Karl came to me and was with me and telling me that he lives [inserted by hand: “I mean in spirit”]. I had made so special a plea, since he had revealed himself to Emily [her husband’s niece] and to AD, and after I had prayed for his coming, I felt sure it would happen as I fell asleep.

My grandmother recorded one more dream of my uncle, on 15 January 1945, exactly seven months after the presumptive date of his death:

In my dream it seemed that I had somehow had news that Karl was in some sort of hospital convalescent home, but living. I was devoured by my eagerness to see him, and reproachful that I had assumed he had been lost when all the time he had been there, wanting me.

There is that word “reproachful” again—always applied to matters of faith—and this time directed by my grandmother against herself. “Oh ye of little faith,” as Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount. Had my uncle climbed out of his cockpit, that June day, injured but alive, he might indeed have been still convalescing in January of 1945.

We hurried impatiently—a long roundabout journey. At length, we reached a large squarish building. We hurried thru the corridors, and finally came to a room, a ward, and there he was, smiling and holding out his arms.

Karl is almost like an infant. Perhaps this was the reason that, near the end of her life, suffering from dementia and loneliness, my grandmother tore a photograph of two babies out of a newspaper and smeared their mouths with food, mothering them. She believed their eyes followed her everywhere, though they could not walk, because they had no muscles. In her dream, my grandmother embraces her son:

I threw myself into [his arms] and we clasped each other close in joy beyond telling. Finally I drew apart enough to look at him—he was deeply tanned and looked well though he seemed to have been wounded and to be not quite strong.

Dreams, however lifelike, often leave clues that they are nonetheless dreams. Or else it is our unsleeping disbelief that plants these clues in dreams.

We gazed at each other, and then I rested my head on his breast with his arms around me, in peace and joy beyond any understanding, while he smiled and talked joyfully. So it was for a long time, and then I became gradually and gently awake. . .with

happy tears in my eyes. I *know* Karl has been with me—I could still feel his presence and his radiance and lightness, without a shadow of mournfulness or sorrow—but as though he shone with pure joy and vitality. Such things are past knowing except in spirit—but I am sure Karl lives and comes to us to comfort us and shed upon us the blessing of his joy and life.

Phrases such as “beyond telling,” “beyond any understanding,” and “past knowing” suggest that the content of the exchanges between the living and the dead are less important than the reality of their having happened. After all, what would any of us actually *say* if we were given one more chance to speak with someone we love whom we know to be dead?

The closure provided by the mere certainty of death is not closure. A conversation, a relationship, as ferociously and permanently terminated as the one between my grandmother and my uncle requires closure, but in a different dimension. This is a closure negotiated over time, a psychic and spiritual closure independent of the reality of the flesh. The living must acquire the habit of being accompanied by the dead. They must be weaned from the dailiness of human contact, moved toward the dependability of a life in memory and toward the infinite possibilities for the reinterpretation of that lost life. The dead are not leading a parallel existence elsewhere on this earth: they are living in us.



It may be that, for certain imaginative sensibilities, “knowing what happened” is just the starting point for a constructed afterlife. My grandmother’s sequence of visions took place even as official correspondence was passing back and forth. On 20 July 1944, my grandmother inquired about whether there was any further information about my uncle, and on 26 July was told that there was no change in his status. His personal effects were returned to her in the early spring of 1945, accompanied by an itemized list dated 20 February. A letter dated 11 July 1945 from Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal stated:

In view of the length of time that has elapsed without any indication that your son survived, I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he is deceased. . . . I extend my deepest sympathy to you in your sorrow. It is hoped that you may find comfort in the knowledge that your son gave his life for his country, upholding the highest traditions of the Navy.

Letters of condolence followed from US Senator Thomas C. Hart (4 August 1945), Connecticut Governor Raymond E. Baldwin (9 August), and Harvard University President James B. Conant (11 September). The idea that my uncle might have been killed inadvertently by his own side appears nowhere in the official correspondence, but a pilot who flew with my uncle that day told me, near the end of his own life, that a death by friendly fire would certainly have been possible, and maybe even likely. Having received from Navy Secretary Forrestal the confirmation of my uncle's presumptive death, my grandmother's second husband responded that "We at least have the consolation of knowing that our son gave his life in helping to save this glorious country of ours" (17 August 1945). Perhaps there would have been no effect on my grandmother's sense of my uncle's mission and sacrifice even if she had received confirmation that an antiaircraft shell from a US Navy ship had killed her son.

The arrival of my uncle's personal effects must have been especially hard. The typed list feels stark, in its numerical and alphabetical orderliness:

- 1 Ball, Golf
- 2 Boards, shoulder, Ensign
- 1 Brush, hair
- 1 Brush, shaving
- 1 Brush, tooth
- 32 Buttons, gold
- 1 Capcover, blue
- 1 Certificate, Naval Aviators
- 1 Chapstick
- 2 Games, 1 Chess, 1 Acey Deucy

- 1 pr., Gloves, leather, grey
- 12 Handkerchiefs
- 1 Kit, coloring
- 1 Kit, toilet
- 1 Mirror, metal
- 1 New Testament
- 12 Pencils, drawing
- 2 Photos
- 1 pr., Shoes, brown, high
- 1 pr., Shoes, brown, low
- 3 Snapshots
- 1 Suspender
- 1 Seashell
- 1 pr., Wings, large, gold. . .

It would require the patience of an archeologist opening a Bronze Age tomb to reconstruct a life on the basis of such an inventory. And yet, in the absence of the body that held them and used them, every item resonates with significance. Or so my grandmother must have felt. I certainly feel it, for the few objects belonging to my uncle that have come down to me.



Within two months of my uncle's being reported as missing, part of my grandmother's mind was working its way around to parallel explanations for the senselessness of his loss. First, there was the idea that he was, from birth, *too good* for this world, and she described herself to a relative as one

who saw in him the other-worldliness shining through with a beautiful and heart-troubling radiance. Even when he was little he did not seem like others, but rather as if he were looking on, with a detachment of his own, like someone from a far country. . . . He was wonderful beyond the power of words to express, and left me a memory so precious that it will remain with me all my life. (30 August 1944)

From this position, it is only a slight extension to celebrate what my uncle was *spared* of ordinary life by dying at the young age he did. Significantly, she wrote to my father, who was serving in the Army Air Force,

[Karl's] life was complete and perfect in a way that it might not have been had he been spared to struggle after the war with the burdens and disappointments of the world, and we can be glad that he was able to do what he wanted to do and make his life count for something in the struggle against evil in which we are all engaged. Certainly no mother ever had two sons of whom she could be more proud. (22 August 1944)

In a version of this passage she sent to another correspondent, my grandmother added a paraphrase of a line in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," making herself the maiden pursuing the fair youth, and declaring "Forever shall I love, and he be fair." She also transcribed lines from Laurence Binyon's 1918 poem "For the Fallen":

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

My uncle's otherworldly goodness; the completeness of his young life; the fact that he was doing what he wanted to do and was good at; and the patriotic imperative of service to one's country: my grandmother is working all of these angles. And she expresses pride in *two* sons, not just one. Indeed, her second husband responded on her behalf to Navy Secretary James Forrestal's letter of July 1945 confirming my uncle's death with a letter dated 17 August, two days after Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's unconditional surrender, that read in part:

We are giving thanks that our other son, who has just returned after twenty-one missions over Germany in an Army bomber, may not be sent to the Pacific.



Ensign Karl W. Kirchwey Jr., USNR, 1943.

Courtesy of the author.

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And yet it seems such rationalizations failed to deliver my grandmother from an enduring and stubborn grief that was sometimes vengeful, as if she had taken at face value the charge in Shelley's poem, "Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent." The son who lived on in ordinary imperfection to face the "burdens and disappointments of the world" was her eldest, my father. And as the reply to James Forrestal suggests, he, too, served in combat. His eyesight was not good enough for him to become a pilot, so he trained pilots in Rantoul, Illinois, for part of the war, then learned German and became a radio voice intercept operator, flying out of England between October 1944 and May 1945. He seems to have volunteered for combat duty, dissatisfied with life in the rear echelon even though he was recently married. And he got the action he was looking for: for years after the war, he would wake screaming from nightmares about what he saw during combat.

My grandmother and my father would have forty more years together, but in some moods, it seems that she never forgave him for

coming home alive. Perhaps she found his cautious life an ongoing rebuke of the fetish she had made of my uncle's life of heroism and daring. The irony is that, in college and even before, my uncle had lived in my father's shadow. It was my father who was gregarious and popular, a versatile athlete and an excellent student. Nonetheless, at some point my grandmother said to my father, "My life ended the day your brother died," and even, if family history is to be believed, "The wrong son came home." What could have prompted such wounding and self-destructive remarks, remarks that had the effect of driving my father even further into himself, where those who loved him most could only occasionally reach him?

I have turned these remarks over and over again in my mind, trying to understand where they came from and how they were intended. I wonder whether "My life ended the day your brother died" might have been uttered with a wail of defeat, as if to say, "I have tried and tried to move on, but I have been permanently staggered by the loss of one of my two beloved children." I wonder whether "The wrong son came home" might have been uttered, not in suspicion of a cunning imposture (like Martin Guerre) but more prophetically, suggesting that my father had survived the war but that he was less able to endure the memory of it than his brother would have been: that his gentle nature would be in a permanent torsion. And yet these possibilities have taken me years to arrive at. The deliberate and calculated cruelty of the remarks never fades and always seems the most likely reading.

Given two unsuccessful marriages, it may be inevitable that my grandmother could not relinquish what might have been the most fulfilling relationship of her life, which was that with her youngest son. And it is possible that she felt guilty for having let him become a pilot in the first place—though it is unlikely she could have changed his resolution to do so. The vocation of course had all sorts of dashing and romantic trappings, but they were made vivid by the very real dangers of combat flying, including that of being burned alive or drowned in a crashed plane. The poet and fiction writer James Dickey, himself a veteran of the Army Air Force, remarked that "The airplane



is a mutilation machine.” As his involvement with flying deepened, my uncle wrote to my grandmother,

I want you to know how much easier it has been for me to take what *is* a fateful step with your support. I know it has not been easy for you to resign yourself to my being an aviator. . . . That is why your understanding has meant so much to me. (25 February 1942)

My uncle accepted the risk for himself but was also aware of the cost to those around him. In the same letter, he contemplates his own apparent heedlessness and attributes it less to his relationship with his mother than to a time in which “too often youth does not understand the ideas and ideals of the older generation.” But he believes that now the crucial issue is “saving a world which makes it possible to work out *any* destiny,” and anticipates that the generations will be united in this mission. Given the American wars that followed this one—Korea, Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan—it is hard to recover the magnitude of the Second World War, and the clarity of commitment it elicited from some people, the determining effect it had on their lives.



Disabled by a kamikaze attack off the Japanese island of Kyushu on 14 May 1945, my uncle’s ship the *Enterprise* spent the last part of the war under repair in the Puget Sound Navy Yard, in Washington State. The ship was still there for VJ-Day on 2 September, although at one point early in the war, she had been the only American carrier still afloat in the Pacific. From the 26th to the 29th of October of that year, *Enterprise* docked in New York City for a Navy Day celebration. In his history of the ship, Commander Edward P. Stafford writes,

In that time some 300,000 crowded aboard *Enterprise* to walk her decks, touch her guns, talk to some of the men that had stood between them and their enemies for so long. . . . These were the people to whom Tom Wolfe refers as the “faceless man-throw” and the “sidewalk cipher”—but it was for them that she had fought from Oahu to Kyushu, for them that she had lost [those]

who unchallengeably were better men than any who came aboard to thank her.

It is worth pondering Stafford's crude moral comparison. I doubt that many of the visitors would have thought to compare themselves to any of those on the list of names of lost aviator heroes elided in Stafford's passage above. But one problem with lists is that they can become conspicuous, not only for those they include, but also for those they omit. My uncle's name, for example, is not on Stafford's list. And I suspect that other combat veterans visited the ship. By what calculus could one establish who was "better"?

My grandmother was one of those 300,000 people. The letter to her from the Navy Office of Public Information on 18 September 1945 declares that "no pass of any sort will be necessary" for a visit to the *Enterprise*, and "you will be welcomed aboard to talk with the officers who may have been friends of your step-son." But a telegram to my grandmother dated 22 October, no doubt in response to further queries of hers, is more circumspect:

UNABLE TO LOCATE ANY FRIENDS REMAINING ON BOARD X  
PLEASE ADVISE TIME YOU WILL VISIT SHIP SO ARRANGEMENTS  
CAN BE MADE = U.S.S. ENTERPRISE

I am left wondering what that visit was like, for my grandmother. She visited a cenotaph of steel with only the consolation of knowing that her son had once lived there and lifted off from its deck. Those who had served aboard the *Enterprise* would have wanted only to return to their own families and resume their civilian lives. They would not have lingered for one more grief-stricken parent.

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The naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison employs a remarkable metaphor (which he acknowledges comes from Henry James's 1908 short story "The Jolly Corner") in describing the view of an island invasion as a pilot would see it:

It is as if you were poised over a bowl of Venetian crystal with a miniature seascape in the bottom, “set delicately humming by the play of a moist finger around its edge”—the humming of airplane motors and amphtracs’ [amphibious vehicles] diesels, the vibration of one’s own plane, the drum-tap of machine-gun fire; for at 10,000 feet the rude cacophony of war becomes harmonious, in the Aeolian mode.

In the James story, Spencer Brydon returns to his family home in New York City after thirty-three years abroad and wishes to confront the self he never became in the United States:

Feeling the place once more in the likeness of some great glass bowl, all precious concave crystal, set delicately humming by the play of a moist finger round its edge. The concave crystal held, as it were, this mystical other world, and the indescribably fine murmur of its rim was the sigh there, the scarce audible pathetic wail to his strained ear, of all the old baffled forsworn possibilities.

My uncle’s possibilities were baffled and forsworn, not by choice, but by death. Yet this work by James is a horror story, because Spencer Brydon is looking for something that is forbidden, which is a glimpse of his own alter ego, his alternative and un-lived life. He succeeds in his quest, but is almost obliterated by the experience:

Falling back as under the hot breath and the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed, he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way.

I think my grandmother’s stubborn memorializing of my uncle’s life and death may have amounted to a similar trespass. She wanted something she could not have—which was her youngest son alive, and become her lover—and she was punished for this. Here was, indeed, a life larger than her own (made so in part by her reverencing of it), but one which nature and human custom insisted she must give up. And I wonder whether it was, perhaps, my uncle’s “rage of

personality” in a life cut off at the age of twenty-two that turned on his own votary and blighted her life for its unnaturalness.

No doubt this overstates the case. Quite apart from the difficulty of deciding on the limits of grief and remembering, I do not believe that my uncle was an avenging ghost, and my grandmother was not a monster. Her correspondence suggests she loved and appreciated my father, the son who came home from the war:

You are a wonderful son and a very rare and dear person altogether and I want you to know that I think so—and I’m not alone in that happy opinion either! I hear it on all hands and it makes me mighty pleased and proud. Any way, bless you for all you are and do. (31 October 1952)

Her feelings seemed unchanged even eight years later:

I am proud of you . . . most of all because you make so many people happy, and because you have such a wonderful understanding of just what to do when everything seems in a tangle. You are so like “Papa Georgie” [my great-grandfather] in that—he was always such a rock of refuge and good cheer, and so loved by so many people. (9 March 1960)

My father’s interest in others was genuine, whether or not it was in part a way of diverting attention from himself. And he must have recognized his mother’s love for him.

But the emotional stalemate for mother and son was also real. My grandmother’s correspondence to my father and mother during the decade of the 1950s charts a steadily eroding sense of independence and self-confidence. She and her second husband lived in a large and picturesquely named house (“Tree Tops”) in New Canaan, Connecticut, that they gradually became unable to manage. Holidays and birthdays pass helplessly unremarked; her attempts to narrate accidents and ordinary illnesses matter-of-factly instead make them seem like major crises; and the nightly application of Old Fashioneds becomes more and more essential. My grandmother was a gifted and very knowledgeable gardener as well, and family visits and the routine



Staff Sergeant George W. Kirchwey III,  
US Army Air Forces, n.d.  
Courtesy of the author.

chores of life eventually make even tending to her garden an insurmountable task.

A.D. dominated my grandmother in their marriage and eventually tyrannized her. While she is trying to clarify the guest list for my parents' wedding, her fundamental psychological fragility is laid bare:

I'm so sorry last night's phone call was so scrambled and hectic. It just happened to come when I didn't have my list of things I wanted to ask you and didn't have my glasses, and also when [A.D.] was tired and edgy, and he, and his urgency about making the call brief, finally upset me too. (9 May 1954)

In another letter, she speaks of what may have been chronic depression:

I must confess I've been having one of the worst slumps I've had for a year or two—very discouraging! But I'm at last coming out of it. Everything has seemed to be at cross purposes for the past few weeks and it finally got me down. (30 June 1956)

In spite of A. D.'s self-approving cantankerousness, my grandmother remained devoted to him, though the relationship and its circumstances continued to deteriorate:

The real trouble is that I feel he is on the edge of a real nervous breakdown—*everything* is too much for him, and he goes to pieces at the slightest extra strain. I'm just hanging on and *praying* that he can handle all these problems . . . but feel he must be spared any extra effort that seems to be too much for him. (7 May 1959)

All of my grandmother's support could not prevent A.D. from losing a fortune in an unsuccessful bid to patent and manufacture an industrial twist-drill machine through the Wilt Engineering Company. As my grandmother said, this was "a matter of the grimmest economic necessity," because A.D. seems to have been a libertarian as well, and rejected both private insurance and Social Security. When he died, he left my grandmother with nothing.

Beginning in 1959 and ending only with her death in 1982, my father became responsible, partly or entirely, for my grandmother's financial maintenance, in addition to raising and educating me and my younger brother. He also had responsibilities in the upbringing of his daughter from his first marriage (my older half-sister) and of my mother's two sons by her first marriage (my two older half-brothers). My father seems to have accepted his role in the family as a dependable drudge, to be overlooked and taken for granted. After all, it is those who act out who get the attention. A favorite great-aunt of mine who was otherwise quite clear-sighted doted on one of my father's cousins who during the war had been aboard a torpedoed ship in the South Atlantic, served as an ambulance driver in the Middle East, and then fought with the Free French Forces. This cousin went on to

work for the *New York Times*, the International Labor Organization, and finally the United Nations. I remember him as being quite dour, but he certainly had a colorful resumé, and my great-aunt arranged for him to have recreational flying lessons, a fact that my father resented. The parable of the prodigal son hovers somewhere behind my family's history.



In their later years, it seems my grandmother and my father could not be left alone together without quarreling and tears. "Why is he so rough with me?" my grandmother once asked. "He treats me like a fishwife. I'm beginning to hate him, that's what scares me." It seems a ghastly irony that my grandmother became uniquely dependent upon the son she had, even if in a moment of calculated rage or hopeless despair, rejected. And she was given a great deal of time and solitude in which to contemplate the errors and misfortunes of her life. Two years before she died, when she was confusing me with her dead son (or her dead first husband), she said to me,

I wake up in the morning and I just want to go back to sleep, but I know that isn't right, so I get up and struggle through the day and I'm glad when it's over. I don't want to wake up. I was trying to find something to put on. I just can't face another day. But I try and then I find I've wasted the whole day and I'm ashamed of myself and I hate myself.

My family's judgment of my grandmother was unsparing: she was "difficult," a narcissist, and prone to hysteria. Yet this ignores the years she spent gamely trying to survive and trying to be of use to others. When my own mother died suddenly just before my sixteenth birthday in 1972, my grandmother wrote me that

It is at such times that we really see what it means to love one another, and how love can never die. There is nothing more wonderful in life than to love, and it is the one thing that never

fails, and can not be taken away from us. When we love, we go on together—those dear to us who have gone ahead of us into the larger life, and we who still have our earthly life to live. (25 February 1972)

I think my grandmother must have been thinking of her own loss when she wrote this letter of consolation to me. And though her youngest son had been taken from her, and both of her marriages had left her unfulfilled, she had the courage to claim that love “never fails.” The visions distilled out of her grief at what happened in June 1944 seem to have settled, finally, into a genuine spiritual conviction.

My father’s amiability did not exempt him from darker feelings and more visceral reactions. He may have discovered that the best revenge against his mother, emotionally speaking, was to withdraw from her. But the reality is that my father had been driven into personal equivocation and emotional distance years before, perhaps because of the trauma he himself experienced in the war. The dapper undergraduate scholar-athlete nicknamed the “Tea-Dancer” did not return from the war, and my father, who had thought of becoming a doctor, took the first job that was offered to him upon his return to the United States, working in his father-in-law’s factory in Connecticut. With the exception of his third and final marriage to a woman considerably younger than he, my father felt rejected by all of the women with whom he had been involved: and this began with his own mother. Yet it is the word “happiness” that occurs most frequently, and most elusively, in my grandmother’s correspondence, the plangency of which lies in her repeated attempts to create hope out of the wreckage of life. In this regard, my uncle’s early death, which was after all a common tragedy during the Second World War, had emotional consequences that lasted long after he was gone.



*Motherboard*

The audio on my laptop comes and goes,  
 and unpredictably, and no one knows why,  
 so after the usual arc of rage and panic  
 during meetings, the humiliating dumbshows,  
 shouting (inaudibly) CAN YOU HEAR ME?,  
 I have devised an arbitrary sound check:

the choir at King's Lynn singing on YouTube.  
 My father was stationed near there during the war,  
 and may have heard the same hymn in the same place.  
 He was assigned to the 453rd Bombardment Group,  
 flying raids in a B-24 Liberator,  
 destroying towns and churches just like this.

My father was a reader, a gentle soul,  
 and fitted out library shelves in his Quonset hut.  
 He wrote home asking for rubber overshoes and fruitcake,  
 and shared his rations with the local people.  
 After the X of runways, the bomb dump, the firing butt,  
 the mud and rain, his mother welcomed him back

by telling him the wrong son had come home  
 (his younger brother had died in the Navy),  
 which must have left him screaming in a void,  
 because the rest of his life he just kept mum  
 —compared with which my mumming isn't much, really;  
 and there are worse things than a failed motherboard.