



Born Into Absence

Norma Beasley

I was born into absence.

It was early 1940's, the world fractured by war. Overseas, men fought and died. But in a quiet corner of America, one man—my dad—died for reasons that had nothing to do with bullets or borders. Pneumonia. One month to the day before I took my first breath, he took his last. I arrived in silence that had already settled in, into grief that had already begun to harden around the edges.

I never heard his voice, never felt the warmth of his hand. He left no letters, no recordings—only a name, one photograph of him standing with my paternal grandparents in a three-piece suit with his younger brother Joe, one of himself, and another in an oval frame that hung above by bed at the Beasley household. I still have the sepia-colored photo of the family which I dearly cherish.

I have no memory of my mother either. None. Not the feel of her skin, the rhythm of her voice, the scent of her hair. She was there, briefly—a flicker in the earliest part of my story—but by the time I was two, she too was gone. I'm told she remarried. I'm told there was a man, a stepfather, someone who might've taken my hand, but I have no memory of him either. But memory is a gate that doesn't open backward unless something lives behind it, and for me, there is nothing. Only the faint idea of a woman who once held me, once whispered my name. So, I became a child raised by memory keepers who silenced those memories.

Somewhere between the age of two and seven years, I was a fragile heirloom in the home of my paternal grandparents. I think they loved me fiercely because I was the last living thread that tied me and dad to them. I was a baby, unknowing, in a world that had been stunned by war.

Grandma then lost her remaining son and husband, but she carried the loss with strength I would come to understand much later. She read me nursery rhymes which I memorized. She sent me to Sunday school, took me to church, allowed me to walk to school alone and gather the mail since she was crippled. She was a tall quiet woman who allowed me to discover my surroundings with little chastisement. She expressed kindness towards me even when she gave me a spanking for misbehaving.

I was not spoiled but protected. She gave me what she could: structure, stability, and love.

At seven, I was passed into the care of my maternal grandparents. They were different—less cloaked in sadness, more rooted in routine than reflection. Granddad Dooks owned a restaurant that supported a family of four. Their love was practical. There were chores and expectations, rules, and early bedtimes. They had lost a daughter, my mom. But they didn't speak of her. Every Mother's Day granddad brought a gardenia home. "Granddad," I said, "Why do you bring this flower home. Grandma always lets it die."

"It was your mother's favorite flower," he replied.

Her beautiful, framed photograph sat on a small table in the vestibule for all to see when they entered our home. It was the absence of mention that taught me her presence once mattered.

As I grew older, I began to understand that I came from people I would never know—not through hugs or holidays or everyday conversation, but through memory, and the delicate ways love can echo long after a person is gone. I wish they could have lived to see me graduate from college. They would have been proud, I'm sure. I carry their shadows with me, trying to shape my identity around silhouettes.

Sometimes I wonder what it would've been like to grow up in a house with parents, siblings, to hear stories directly from the source, to be wrapped in voices that said, "I remember when you were born." Grief was the soil I was planted in. Mine is a different kind of origin story—one that begins not with presence, but with absence, and somehow continues. ✨

Norma Beasley retired as managing art director, Harcourt Inc., New York.

