

THE THINGS I FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

A MEMORIAL

a story by Ann Heiliger

FOUND IN: WASHINGTON

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a photographic project by Robert Götzfried

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They had been separated for about three months when he was deployed. She had spent 72 nights in her own bed – gloriously sprawled out, no longer huddled in a ball of silent fury with her back turned to him. Those days were done. And while her nights were not truly restful as the baby monitor heckled her with those glowing dots from her son down the hall, she slept more deeply than she had even before he was born.

Divorce. It was a word they themselves had not even uttered. Divorce – it passed in whispers between their families, their friends, their nosy neighbors. But it had not manifested itself between them. And now? Well, now no one knew what to say.

Can you be separated and still be a widow? If you are still legally married, should his friends offer you their sympathies? Send flowers? Make casseroles?

She left the apartment that afternoon mainly because of the flowers. Their stench and conflicting color pallets (some pastel, feathery wildflowers, some artificially dyed carnations, and roses? Who sends roses?) had all done her head in. Sent mainly by the people who were not close to them, who didn't know of the invisible "divorce" in the air, they represented a sympathy that she could not accept, did not want to accept.

So she swept the boy up from the floor, momentarily proud that she had managed to dress him this morning in something other than footy pajamas. In three jerks she unfolded the stroller from behind the door and out they went. - crossing a threshold that he had stepped over himself maybe a handful of times at most. His ghost would not haunt her here. She doubted he would be tempted to.

A few blocks down the street and already the boy was crying. She searched her coat pockets, and between tissues and a capless chapstick she managed to find a pacifier. She plucked it in his mouth and immediately he was quiet again.

The pacifier had been from him. From the night before he left. He had been tense, and also sentimental. He mumbled about how one day they would play catch together, something that struck her as cliché, though she herself would admit that he seemed sincere, a younger version of himself visible for a split second. The pacifier looked like a baseball, and he laughed to see his boy's nose crinkle just above it as he smiled back.

The memory made her walk faster.

The news had come on Tuesday. Two servicemen came to the door with sad eyes. They had the wrong address, they apologized. They should have come yesterday.

It was too sunny. Shouldn't it be raining? Foggy at least? The weather was like the flowers – poorly placed color where she wanted gray.

And noisy. But then DC always was. She crossed streets mindlessly, following the illuminated white stick figure across intersection after intersection. The boy was quiet, or if he made noise, it was absorbed by the city. She saw his small hand reach out from time to time, pointing at a motorcycle, a dog, an ice cream vendor.

What could she point to? What did she want? She envied his transparency.

A few more blocks and they were at the mall. She had always liked how symmetrical it was, how orderly. As if she could walk from monument to monument and come out the other side a better version of herself. Her posture would be perfect. Her jaw line more defined.

She did a quick self assessment and scoffed at the idea. Here she was, bent over the stroller, out of breath from her pace, from her thoughts.

They used to come here when they were dating. He knew so many things, or seemed to. Later he confessed to binging on historical facts to impress her with before these walks. His posture was perfect.

She thought of the funeral, of everything to prepare. His mother had written the obituary. Thank God for that. But the funeral would require something of her. She must look the part, seated in the front row. And the boy? Would she hold him? Do they make funeral clothes for boys so small? Would his cheeks look as rosy in black?

She looked at him again. His mouth hung slightly open, no sign of the baseball pacifier. She didn't know what to say, and felt he needed her to say something. His father was gone. His gift was gone. If the boy pointed, what could she give?