Truth Be Told

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Truth Be Told

by Lauren Carter

I don't know what it's like to be born blind. I don't know if you can be aware that there's such a thing as sight when you don't have it. I don't know if you see blackness in front of you, or nothing at all, and think that this is what everyone experiences. But I do know what it's like to be born without a father. I didn't know what a father was, and I didn't know that I didn't have one. I knew that I had a mother, and aunts and uncles, and cousins, and grandparents who loved me very much, but I didn't know that someone, something, was missing. My father's absence was unnoticed, maybe even welcomed. He was like a well-kept secret within my family, something mentioned in whispers behind cupped hands, in quiet phone calls behind shut doors, but never out in the open, and never to me. Somewhere between the ages of two and three, I began to visit my father, infrequently, and usually under my mother's supervision. I never quite understood what was happening when I went to see this large, unfamiliar man. I wondered who he was.

I don't remember any one of my visits with him distinctly. I vaguely recall the look of his apartment, the shape of the rooms, the smell of the air inside, and not
much more. Some of the images come back to me, a greenish-yellow couch and an orange rug, heavy wooden doors with brass knobs, but I can't really remember how my father looked, or what it felt like to be with him.

What I do remember very clearly is the moment I found out that my father was dead. It was 1982, and I was four years old. My mother and I were in the kitchen in our first home, a small ranch on a dead-end street. I was sitting on the table with my legs dangling over the edge, and she was standing in front of me, over me, changing the band-aid on my forehead from a tumble I had taken earlier that week. I remember exactly what she said to me, and I remember that as she said it, she was ripping off the old band-aid in order to apply a new one.

"Lauren," she said, "you know, your father's dead." She said this matter-of-factly, as if I should know that my father was dead, but all I knew was that my forehead stung and I didn't know how to respond.

"Dead?" I asked, repeating the word, feeling its weight, a weight that was even heavier in my mouth than in my ears. I wasn't quite sure what "father" meant to me, but I was pretty sure I knew what "dead" meant. It meant that he was gone, and that his leaving was permanent. "What, what happened to him?" I asked.

"He was very sick, honey. But it doesn't matter," she said. "He never bothered with you anyway." She dabbed my cut with a cotton ball drenched in rubbing alcohol and I winced, my forehead tender and burning now.

My father didn't bother with me. That was something I didn't know. I thought we just didn't see each other much. But he didn't want to see me. He didn't care about me. So his death, whatever death truly meant, shouldn't matter.

"It's ok now," she said, rubbing a warm antibiotic cream on my skin, removing a fresh band-aid from its package, pulling the smooth, white protective strips off, then leaning forward. "Almost done," she said, placing one side of the band-aid on my forehead, pressing down with her thumb and pushing lightly across it, as if she was sealing an envelope. Her touch was even, steady. I exhaled. "See? All better," she said. Yes, that did feel better. The burning was almost gone.

I slid down from the table's edge, turned to my left and walked into the parlor. I stopped momentarily by the dining room table, looking out the window, then ambled over to my Sit n' Spin, where I spun in a tight circle, watching the world rush by in a chaos of shape and color, watching the room melting around me, bleeding like paint on a wet canvas, hoping that if I spun fast enough, I would make it all disappear.

Well, I didn't make the room disappear. I merely got dizzy, and then I got tired, and then I dragged myself into my bedroom and drifted into a sound sleep that put the news of my father's death in the past, and separated my past from my future.

When I awoke, I would only vaguely remember what I had learned, and I would feel nothing, because it didn't matter, just as my mother had said. That sentence was like a warm, comfortable sweater, protecting me from the coldness of death, and when I tried it on, it fit nicely. It was easier that way, not to care, it meant that I could nod and smile when his relatives told me that I looked more like my father every day, that I could gaze at pictures of him with the indifference I might afford an abstract painting in a museum, that I could live each day of my life without his presence, and never feel a hint of his absence at all.

It was too easy.

The problem was, when I received the news of my father's death, my father wasn't actually dead. In fact, he had two more years to live. But it was only as a teen-
ager that I would put it all together, that I would do the math and realize that my father died when I was six, but my mother told me he had died when I was four. And it was then that I began to wonder what else I didn’t know, what else I had been wrong about. I began to wonder who my father actually was, and why I never really knew him. It wasn’t until age seventeen that I would find out, find out where my father had been, and why it was nowhere near me.

On that day, thirteen years later, in the midst of a thick, humid July, I found myself once again in a kitchen, with my mother, hearing news about my father I didn’t know how to respond to. But this time we weren’t in a ranch on a dead end street and I wasn’t a four year old sitting on the table. This time we were in a duplex on a cul-de-sac and I was a seventeen year old getting ready to go off to college.

What did she say? I thought. What is my mother saying to me? I heard the word, but I knew I must have heard her wrong.

“Prison, Laur. Your father was in prison.”

Prison. The word registers in my mind. A shift inside. Like a click. Fast, unmistakable. Then everything changes. My stomach begins to burn. I feel something spreading, slow, like a warm liquid, out to my shoulders, then down my arms, and finally to my fingertips, making them tingle. I look at my fingertips. They’re sitting gingerly on the creamy white counter in our kitchen.

I look at the placemats. Wild pinks with flashes of green, a tropical scene, even though we’re in New England. Two napkins that will never be used for anything but show sit on top of them. They match the placemats and are held in perfect arrangement by two thick wooden bands, dark brown in color, that make me think of Hawaii, or Indonesia. Maybe that’s where they were made. Or maybe that’s just where the company who makes them wants you to think they were made, when really they came out of a factory in Albany. They have pictures carved in them. Of what, I can’t tell. I slide one band off the napkin, and set the napkin down on the placemat, disheveled. I hold the brown band in my hand, move it back and forth in my fingers, inspect it. My mother straightens the napkin, prepares it to be re-sheathed.

I don’t know what to say. I think there should be a right way to react, but I don’t know what it is. What am I feeling inside? Shock, surprise. Anger, for being lied to, for so many years. Relief, because there is finally an explanation, there is a reason that my dad wasn’t around, and it has nothing to do with the fact that he didn’t care about me. And a strange kind of happiness that I can’t fully explain. I am sure the feeling doesn’t make sense.

I set the brown ring down on the table and look at my mother. She looks different to me now. Just slightly. Like I’m not sure that what is and what appears to be are the same thing anymore.

An invisible line in my mind extends through my past, all the way back to a warm spring day in the first house I ever lived in, sitting on a table in the kitchen, getting my band aid changed while I learn that my father died.

And now I understand the happiness. Because finally I can feel something.

That day in the duplex, I was 17 years old. And I learned that when my father was 17 years old, he wasn’t working at Burger King like I was, or preparing for his first year of college, like I was, or falling in love for the first time, like I was, but going to the state’s only maximum security prison to serve a life sentence for second degree murder.

Allegedly, he had killed a man. In
a barroom brawl. He had been hanging out with an older crew, and drinking too much at a local bar. There was a verbal fight between my father’s group of friends and another man. It turned violent, deadly. The man was stabbed to death. My father hid the knife in his room, and when the police came looking for it a week later, they found it. My father’s friends unanimously claimed that he had murdered that man, whose name I don’t know. My father’s family was working, but poor, and couldn’t afford a good defense lawyer. According to my relatives, the lawyer that was appointed to represent my father fell asleep during the trial. Several times. At age 17, my father was tried as an adult and sentenced to life in the state’s most brutal prison.

My mother told me one more thing. That my father had maintained, until the day he died, that he couldn’t remember committing the crime. That he had drank too much, and blacked out. That he never knew whether or not he committed murder that night.

After that conversation with my mother, I thought I had the facts. Or that I had some of the facts. But the more I thought about what I had learned, the more I felt as though I knew nothing about my father at all.

Because even the truth about him wasn’t true anymore; there were bits and pieces of the lie inside of it. The fact that your dad doesn’t come around much, that’s true. But the truth of that fact changes when you realize he can’t come around because he’s locked up in prison.

So I became interested, in my father, and in prisons. I did an internship at MCI-Walpole, writing a script for a documentary of the prison’s history. I sifted through reports and read through newspaper articles about the prison. I analyzed daily events and turned them into a kind of story. I toured the prison, walked through its hallways and into its cellblocks, full of prisoners, and into its former death chamber, dark and empty. I thought I was becoming an expert on the prison’s 49 year history; really, I knew very little. I knew so little that it was only after I had been working on the documentary for six months that I found out, from my mother, after some very persistent questioning, that my father had been incarcerated there. That I had been reading about inmates at Walpole as if they were complete strangers, and my own father had been one of them.

Eventually that internship ended, but through my contacts at the prison I learned that I could access my father’s prison folder, that it had become a matter of public record once he died. So that’s what I did.

I read his prison folder carefully, diligently. I learned that my father spent a year in the Departmental Segregation Unit, a place I visited about a year ago, during my internship, before I knew that my father had spent time there, a place where the worst, most incorrigible inmates are kept, a place where those inmates spend 23 hours a day in their cells, and spend the 24th hour showering, and pacing back and forth inside of an outdoor, fenced-in cage.

I learned that he earned his GED in prison, because he had gone there before completing high school. I learned that he assaulted two correction officers and three inmates, and spent the majority of his first 8 years either in 24-hour isolation, or being transferred from prison to prison. I learned that he changed his name in the early 1970’s, becoming Lawrence X. But this didn’t last long. He was back to Lawrence Burnett by 1977. I learned that courses he took and activities he became involved in amounted to good time, time taken off of his sentence. Adopting a religion meant obtaining an earlier release. I understood the name change. And I learned that my father wrote his “L’s” the same way that I do, grandly sloping, unnecessarily elaborate.

I read comments from correc-
tions officers, teachers and prison officials.

“Lawrence is an intelligent individual who expresses both ideas and emotions clearly.” “He is reliable and commendable in personal appearance.” “Lawrence always came to class fully prepared. As a tutor, he helped me to conduct the class meetings.” “Lawrence had great difficulty making the adjustment.”

I read his comments. I am mentioned once, in a letter he wrote, an appeal to the superintendent for placement in a prison without walls. “I have a good job waiting for me,” he wrote in the letter, “a loving woman and a thirteen month old daughter, and my own automobile.”

I notice that I am placed after the woman and before the car.

And I looked at the pictures. There were three sets of them, with two pictures in each set, one taken from the front, the other taken from the side. In each of the pictures a black, rectangular board with white lettering hangs from his neck. The letters spell out his name, his inmate number, and the date, so I can see that the pictures span across almost 20 years. In the first picture my father looks young, innocent. His hair is cropped close to his head, and his eyes are closed. In the second picture, his face has filled out and he looks casual, yet tough. He is wearing a red track suit and his afro is large and bushy. In the final picture, he is skinny. His face and shirt are wrinkled and he looks haggard, as if he is ill.

So I read through the folder, and I wonder what he might have been. If the night of that murder was just a coincidence, an anomaly, without which the rest of his life might have played out like the lives of his siblings, successful, full of meaningful work, large families, and lots of love. Or if he was already on a path of destruction, driven by some internal demon his siblings didn’t share, and would have ended up where he was eventually, one way or the other.

And while I think about all of these things, about his past and mine, about my future, I think about the future that the court says he took away. While I drive to work sometimes, on windy back streets with tall grass and large houses and sprawling farms, streets where cars seldom pass and the speed limit sign reads “35 – strictly enforced” but no one ever goes 35 and there’s no one ever there to enforce it, not even loosely, I wonder about the victim. All this time spent thinking about my father, but what about his victim? Who did he kill? Or who did he take the rap for killing? Did that man have a daughter? I think that maybe I could find out, if I really wanted to, and visit that person’s gravesite, and lay a flower there, and maybe even speak to his relatives. But I stop myself. That must be absurd. Contacting his relatives would be wrong. Maybe even visiting his gravesite wouldn’t be right. Maybe even if I could find out who his victim was, I shouldn’t. But still I think about the victim, and I don’t quite know what is fair. I think that there’s no easily solution, no mathematical formula that can give back to one side what murder has taken away on the other. But still I wonder what should be done.

The statistics say that the national recidivism rate is between 40 and 50%. But I can’t speak for the statistics; I only know about my father. And after being paroled in 1980, he returned to prison in 1984 for aggravated assault. At 37 years old, he was sentenced to 40 to 50 years. He died 282 days after his sentencing, of colon cancer, a disease that does not run in his family. At the end of a document called a “movement history,” which records an inmate’s movements within the prison system, it simply reads “Released by Death.” I see now, as he must have seen then, that death was his only way out.
I am not done with my research. I plan to keep searching for answers, because whatever he wasn’t, Lawrence Burnett was my father, even if only briefly, and biologically. And I’ve made a promise to myself to find out who my father was, and not just what he became.