

DIANNA MARIE CANNIZZO

### **The Land of VA**

HE HAS LIVED IN THE LAND OF VA for almost fifty years now. It is now familiar territory, unlike those early years, when he had been dropped full force into unknown terrain. A terrain of stark white, dark green and a grey that moved like a fog—a fog that settled in corners and crevices. Hallways lined with green, government issued chairs, rows of closed white doors, men shuffling along corridors. He has learned the language of VA: he knows what words trigger the staff's concern, he knows what words set in motion changes in treatment, he has learned from years of group therapy how to calmly express anger, how to form a clear 'yes' and a clear 'no'. He has come to know and like some of the inhabitants and even plays cards with some of them. Yes, he feels that he has been a good citizen and followed the rules of this corner of the world. But, he keeps his real home to himself, he guards it carefully not wanting VA to set foot in this other world. Today, someone from that other world is coming to visit him—his daughter, Dianna.

He has thought often of her and of his other daughter in these years here. But, today he wonders what she'll think of him. He has questions to ask her—questions that have plagued him for years. He knows that he doesn't engage much in conversation, but he *must* get these words out. Plus, he's seventy-nine now—he feels the tiredness in his bones, the tiredness of thinking. He doesn't know how much time remains for him. He doesn't know if she'll come back again.

When he sees her he will tell her that she's pretty. In fact, the few times she's come to see him in the past he's managed to tell her this. He has no idea that, this time, when he says "You're pretty" to Dianna, her fifty-two years will dissolve around her and she will feel like a little girl again. He does not know that these simple words, uttered by him, will infuse her with recognition and importance. He does not know that she will instantly feel like she is "the apple of someone's eye"—of his eye, of her father's eye. He does not know that these words will be a great gift to her—a gift that she has fought long and hard to hold.

He wants to know if she believes in God. When he was younger God meant something

to him, comforted him in some way but after the war he found this belief hollow, shapeless. Yes, he had an issue with God. Being a medic he was asked to make choices—choices about which wounds were more important, which wounds to heal. The army needed to get as many men with weapons in their hands as possible, as quickly as possible. This meant treating the lesser wounds first and leaving the more serious ones to be transported off the field to another echelon of care. He did all that was asked of him and more but he feels that God left him alone to suffer—to carry impossible weights.

He will ask his daughter if she is happy. He will not speak to her of his unhappiness, of his years of longing for a visitor, of the tangible ache that bends his shoulders. He only cares that she knows happiness.

He will ask her what every human being wants to know—he will ask if she loves him. He knows that he is damaged, that his love is not easily seen but he does love—a silent, steady love. He needs to know if this love will be returned.

Perhaps, the most difficult question of all for him is wondering what his daughter thinks about him—about him as a father. This role came upon him so quickly, so unexpectedly. He knows so little about being a father. He remembers his harsh, strict moralistic father and how he suffered at his hands, how his parents argued, how he tried to make them stop. No, this is not the father he wants or wanted to inhabit. He has been given scraps of fatherhood but he has done all that he could do to make his offerings acceptable. He will have no idea how this question will stun and reshape Dianna's world. He does not know that this question will wash over her like a fresh spring rain, soaking the ground beneath her, giving strength and softness to the earth beneath her feet. With this question Dianna will know that she was loved. She will cherish this question. She will carry this question to her new home. She will honor this love and plant it in a rich and fertile soil.

I was on that long stretch of freeway to the VA hospital. This time I was much older, more mature, my expectations new and different. I savored the beautiful California sun as I drove. Memories that had retreated, rested in my core for so long began to surface.

I remembered the red purses. I can't be sure when the red purses began to arrive. I never knew what city they were from or when they would arrive. What I did know was that sooner or later a package would arrive for me. This went on until I was about twelve years old and then the packages stopped coming. The outside of the package always had our old address on

it with a stamp from the post office forwarding it to our new location. Inside there would always be a small hand-made leather purse. The one I remember most was made of red leather with thick, black, plastic stitching looped along the edges. I could have made it myself in kindergarten. Whenever I got these purses I'd stare at them for a long time, run my hand over the rough leather. Open the large, black metal snap and smell the raw leather inside. Mostly I saw his thin, olive-skinned fingers cutting and assembling the stiff pieces of red leather. I knew my father had made them for me and that I should be happy. But, I didn't know him. My time with him had been so small. The purses were put back in their packages and stored in the garage. Eventually they disappeared.

I remembered one of the last times I'd seen my father—after my parents divorced.

Every Sunday my sister and I visited him at his childhood home in West Berkeley. Wearing petticoats, black patent leather shoes and lacy anklets we stepped into my mother's light green Buick for the drive to his house. She dropped us off and waited until we were safely inside.

My paternal grandparents' house had a large arc shaped window from which you could overlook the neighborhood. I loved skipping a step as I climbed the brick steps leading to the front door. Stefania, my paternal grandmother had an austere, immigrant look with her dark dress and neatly placed bun. When she bent down to kiss me I could feel the tiny whisker on her chin brush my cheek. Once I told her that Stella D'Oro cookies, with a drop of cherry jelly in the middle, were my favorite. From that day on there was always an entire plate of just that cookie waiting for me. I always wondered how she managed to have so many of them on hand because I thought those cookies were part of an assortment. I envisioned her sorting through numerous packages selecting just the jelly ones.

My father was sitting on the couch waiting for us. Even as a child I knew something was wrong with him. He sat erectly with both feet planted on the ground and his long thin, olive skinned fingers rested on his knees. Fingers that reached in slow deliberation for the lit cigarette in the ashtray. Sometimes he just held the lit Camel there as it burned its way to his fingertips—staining, marking him.

On the coffee table in front of him was a small tray with a cup and saucer placed on a starched doily. My petticoat crunched as I seated myself next to him. I noticed the yellow tobacco stains on his fingernails as he reached for the coffee cup. My large, dark eyes were fixed on his movements. He slowly moved the cup to his mouth but then stopped mid-way,

never shifting his gaze. It seemed as if the cup remained suspended forever and then as if someone kick-started an engine he moved the cup quickly to his mouth, drank the coffee and returned the cup and saucer to the tray.

The sharp sounds of my mother's words—words that I heard her say so often—pierced this moment like a loud clap of thunder. “Your father's sick,” she said. Although I didn't know what was wrong with him, I knew she was right.

After eating as many jelly cookies as I could, it was time for the best part of the visit. My father stood up and walked in front of the coffee table. I took my sister's hand and we stood in front of him waiting to be picked up. Sitting on top of my grandparents' television set, in front of the rabbit ear antenna, was a gold framed sketch of a horse—a horse that he had drawn. A long, agile, muscular horse in motion against the wind. I loved this horse. I loved how my father would stand in front of it and pick me up, lifting me up to the ceiling. I always closed my eyes when I was in the air—we were running with horses.

We did this two or three times until he tired and returned to the couch. This was how I remembered the last time I'd seen my father—before the visits ended for good.

My stomach tightened as I got closer to Building 364 and walked through the sliding glass doors. As arranged, my father's new social worker, Jon, met me at the entrance. He was a tall, spindly man who spoke in soft, calming social worker language. He updated me on my father's condition: since being on this unit he had gained weight, he now had glaucoma and his psychotropic meds had been greatly reduced; my father was now seventy-nine years old. He no longer received shock treatments or took large quantities of powerful, numbing drugs. The VA had changed its treatment for trauma over the years, replacing the medications of the past with the elixirs of today.

My father was sitting in his chair, arms folded across his chest. He was wearing a pair of slacks and a blue-checkered shirt with a button down collar. He couldn't sit comfortably and kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. Finally, he saw me approach him. He lifted his tall, thin frame from the chair and stood erectly before me. I was almost as tall as he was and I could see we had the same dark skin and eyes.

“Dad,” I said and took his hand. “I've come from Italy to visit you.”

“Italy!” he said. It sounded both like a question mark and an exclamation point when he said it. A lifetime of emotions streaked across his face in a split second. I wanted him to be proud that I had made my home in Italy, that I had gone back to the beginning, that I was fulfilling the duties of the first-born by savoring tradition.

Jon ushered us into to one of the private rooms. He apologized for the wheelchairs that were temporarily stored there and told us to have a good visit. I awkwardly positioned two empty plastic chairs side by side before sitting down.

I was prepared for my father’s long silences and stilted sentences, so I waited for him to speak. I tried not to stare at him directly fearing to make him uncomfortable. My gaze rested on his hands, which I loved. Smoking was no longer permitted in the hospital so his finger nails had lost that yellow tinge. I looked at his profile: the rounded shoulders, greying hair near his ears. He had aged but he was the same. He was here but where was he. I averted my eyes for a moment focusing on the blue leather of the wheelchair in the corner of the room. He began to fidget in his chair and I sensed words were formulating in his mind. I waited and then he looked at me and asked me this question.

“Are you disappointed in me as a father?” he asked.

This question came quickly and unexpectedly. The shock of his words shifted the familiar structure of the past dismantling my old, inherited perceptions. Perceptions that had been given to me by others: that he was so sick and medicated he could not possibly think about the things people outside his world think about; that his feelings are masked and buried in some underground bunker. In that instant something new emerged from the rubble—a new order began to take shape.

“Of course not,” I said, still trying to absorb the shock to my system. In that moment an idea began to inhabit me: he saw himself as a father, he had thought about me—his daughter—and had worried about my feelings toward him.

But he did not stop there, he had other questions—questions that continued to surprise me. It’s not that we discussed these questions: he seemed only interested in my answers. In fact, I did not have the power to pull together my thinking faculties and formulate questions or even expansive answers.

He asked me three more questions that day:

Do you believe in God?

Are you happy?

Do you love me?

Were these the questions that had been stitched and sown into the red purses, the questions that had been hidden away so long? I had only short sentences to give to his questions that day. But, I didn't care about the small language. His questions were gifts I had longed to receive. We sat in silence afterward. Silence was the air we breathed. The 'dogs of war' may have mangled his mind but his heart was intact. Beating. Strong. True.

I went back the next day.

Today, in my dreams I see him walking along the Berkeley Pier, an empty, faded army green duffle bag swung over his shoulders. He is young, he is facing toward the sun, the Golden Gate Bridge. I am in the distance behind him—watching. The Land of VA is a small, disappearing dot on the Pacific Ocean.

**Dianna Marie Cannizzo** is a teacher, emerging non-fiction writer and daughter of a Korean War Veteran. Her work has appeared in the international online literary journal, *Le Sempregadi*, at the University of Udine, Italy where she teaches. An excerpt from her memoir in progress was chosen as a finalist in the 2017 San Francisco Writer's Conference.