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Connecting My Life to The Things They Carried

Every weekend I open the door to the kitchen to a chorus of shouts.

“Sarah!” my little sisters cry, throwing themselves at me so hard I just about drop my overnight bag as my knees give way to the little bodies trying to hug them. My brother, ten and too old for such sentimental nonsense, just says, “Hey, Sarah.”

“Sarah, Sarah! Look what I did this week!” A handmade craft is thrust into my face.

“Sarah! My cheerleading team got in first place at our competition! *Again!*”

“Great,” I laugh weakly.

“Are you sleeping over?” my sister Karleigh asks.

“Yes, but only tonight. We all have school on Monday,” I remind her.

“Aw!” Karleigh pouts. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too—“

“I wish you could stay here forever!” cries Alexa, my other sister. I laugh, shake my head, and listen to everything they want to tell me, waving to my stepmother and keeping an eye on my brother.

My parents have been divorced for as long as I can remember; they ended their marriage when I was one year old. I’ve always gone back and forth between households, and this is easily my greatest life challenge. I am disconnected to the lives of my father, stepmother, and half-siblings, and find it hard to fit into their routine and to understand their ways of thinking. I have to switch guardianship every week and sacrifice activities that I want to do in order to see them. Spending Monday through Saturday with my

mother and stepfather in Danbury and then spending Sunday (and oftentimes Saturday nights) with my father, my stepmother, and their three children has become routine and ancient, but it never gets easier. Almost every weekend my father comes to take me to his home, an exchange that is often effortless and expected. However, emotionally, things can become slightly tense because my life views have been shaped away from my father's family and by my experiences in Danbury. My father and I disagree about life values and politics so much that it has become somewhat of an uncomfortable family joke.

A large part of The Things They Carried is about what the soldiers "hump," both physically and emotionally. While the soldiers carry supplies, pictures, food, clothes, books, and objects of sentimental value, they also carry overwhelming emotions of grief, guilt, misery, excitement, nervousness, and anxiety, which hang over them just as solidly as the jungles of Vietnam. When I go to my father's house on weekends, I carry things in a backpack, supplies both similar and dissimilar to those of Tim, Lieutenant Cross, and the rest of the platoon: a toothbrush, toothpaste, a hairbrush, various toiletries, my homework, books, clothes, and my cell phone. Spiritually, I "hump" my excitement, my apprehension for possible conflicts to come, as well as love for my family. I feel lucky to have such a large family that loves me, but I often feel discomfort when forced to handle my younger siblings' confusion on why I'm not with them all the time, why I'm often not at their important events, and how I'm related to them and Dad while also being related to my mom and stepfather; to them, this seems like a contradiction.

Tim in The Things They Carried also has conflicting emotions about the duties he has to perform because he is drafted. "I was bitter, sure. But it was so much more than

that. The emotions went from outrage to terror to bewilderment to guilt to sorrow and then back again to outrage.” (O’Brien 43) Tim O’Brien didn’t ask to be drafted into the Vietnam War, and he had very mixed feelings about going through what he was supposed to go through. He even thought about running away to Canada to avoid deployment. I feel like I can relate to the internal struggle that Tim feels. Tim has to go off to war, which is definitely very different from my situation, but I make a choice nearly every weekend. My friends often have plans in place every weekend, conflicting with my schedule with Dad. I have to decide whether to do my duty and visit my family or whether to go to social events with my friends, and the vast majority of the time I choose my father. I hate to admit it, but I sometimes find that I truly resent having to go to Dad’s when I have to give up so much time with my friends to do so. I often feel the same emotions as Tim does: outrage that I have to go to Dad’s when my friends can all go out and have fun, terrified that if I didn’t go with either my friends or my father I would damage my relationship with one or both, bewilderment at my situation, guilty that I sometimes didn’t want to go with my father, sorrowful about how I have to abandon one group or the other each weekend, and outraged again that I have to make the choice. I can connect slightly to Tim because of this toil of emotions in a choice that was really made for me overall.

Another quote that stood out to me was “Some dumb thing happens a long time ago and you can’t ever forget it.” (O’Brien 175) Tim’s daughter says this to him years after the Vietnam War had ended, commenting on the fact that his life was shaped by his experiences in the war. He even brings his daughter to Vietnam to try to have her understand his life. I believe that my parents’ divorce absolutely shaped my life; it made

me who I am today and, of course, makes me take the weekly trip. I would have been a completely different person if they had stayed together, and frankly, I like who I am now. Changing homes every weekend has made me who I am, and while I sometimes like it and sometimes don't, I don't think I would change my experiences if I could. I don't know if Tim would or not, but the way he writes the book makes me think that he wouldn't change his experiences either.

While I can connect to some of the things in The Things They Carried, the book also helps me put my problems into perspective. Tim O'Brien had to constantly worry about his own demise, carry the weight of having killed a man, and trek through the nearly unbearable terrain of Vietnam. He carried more than 68 pounds on his back at a time and was shot twice, always returning to duty. He was burdened by the death of his friends and still managed to live on and keep fighting until the end of the war, living a (mostly) normal life afterwards. Tim took the lemons that life gave him and reluctantly made lemonade, and made it well; no matter how many times his experiences spilt his metaphorical lemonade, he just got back up again. My problems aren't even in the same league as war. I'm not complaining; I am perfectly willing and prepared to take charge in my own life and keep making my own decisions as long as I have to. However, I'll never have to try nearly as hard as Tim O'Brien and his fellow soldiers; their situation was entirely different, but were laden with some similar feelings.