

## Unwavering Reminder by Maggie Kuban Awarded 1st Place

*Photo: Flags*

“For the land of the free, and the home of the brave,” sang the speaker at Liberty Park in Peterson, New Jersey. Once the last word was blasted out and everyone had stopped clapping, Dad reached down to grab our hats. Dad always took his hat off when a song like that played. So I always did too, never giving it a second thought. There hasn’t been a day in my me when our flag wasn’t hung outside, swaying gloriously in the wind. Mom called it patriotism. Dad called it respect.

“Today is my favorite day of the whole year. You know that bud,” Dad said looking down at me with his big brown eyes. Me and Sadie had Mom’s green eyes. But Harper had the same eyes as Dad. I looked back up into Dad’s eyes. Those eyes looked so happy and content right now, but I knew they had witnessed things in Iraq that only happened in nightmares. Mom said Dad was lucky because he could block out the nightmares, that he could lock them away in the deepest part of his mind. But blocking memories out and forgetting them are two different things. Every once in awhile those memories would break the lock and surface at the front of Dad’s mind. Those were the days Dad went to bed at seven in the evening. Those were the days none of us, not even Mom, who could always make Dad feel better, or Harper, who sometimes seemed like she couldn’t shut up, would say a word to Dad. We all knew that Dad would be back to normal the next day. He just needed some time alone to face his demons.

Dad’s arm brushed against mine, pulling me out of my thoughts, as he raised his hand to call Sadie over. Sadie had disappeared with a group of girls from her school for the last half an hour. Her cheeks were red from running around and her eyes, much like Dad’s, shown bright. No doubt from laughing and exchanging secrets with every ten year old girl in the park. She came walking back with our golden retriever Benny, who too looked as though he was out of breath. He came right over to Dad and laid his head down in his lap. Dad chuckled and rubbed Benny’s head.

Mom and Dad both loved Benny. Mom had gotten him when Dad was overseas. She always jokes Benny was her and Dad’s first baby. But Benny was old now and after darting from cemetery to cemetery all day long he looked like he had aged five years. I noticed Sadie had also taken it upon herself to be three flowers on Benny’s collar. Yesterday, Mom, Sadie, and Harper had spent all day in our backyard picking flowers, to lay on headstones today. We’d used almost all the flowers today, as we visited cemeteries like we did every Fourth of July. We’ve seen headstones that dated back to the revolutionary war right up to now. Dad always talked about how soldiers under the dirt didn’t get the continuous respect that soldiers above ground did. So to give those soldiers some respect we devote this important holiday to visiting their graves. We also all knew that we weren’t only paying homage to the soldier whose grave we were standing in front of, but to every soldier who didn’t have a grave, who never made it home, and every soldier whose soul had been left on the battlefield. Even though we are tired, Dad makes sure we always arrive in time see our local firework show at the end of the day.

“Sadie,” I said, “where’s Mom and Harper? The fireworks are starting soon.”

“Your brother is right, Sade,” Dad continued. “They’ll start any minute now.”

“We’re here, we’re here!” I heard a voice shout from behind us. Mom and Harper were walking up to us from the concession stand with an armload of snacks. Popcorn and licorice, soft pretzels and cookies, and all colored red, white, and blue. It looked so yummy that I wanted to devour it all in one bite!

“That was the longest line I’ve ever been in,” Mom blurted out to Dad, sounding annoyed. Harper sat down and put the treats on the blanket. The three of us, four if you count Benny, dove into all the deliciousness.

“Aww,” Mom said petting Benny on the head “poor Benny Boy is wore out.”

“How many cemeteries do you think we visited today?” Mom asked Dad as she sat down.

“Maybe six or seven,” Dad replied.

“I lost count after two,” Harper chimed in.

“Harper that’s not respectful,” Mom commented.

“Not at all,” Dad persisted, “I refuse to spend my Fourth of July eating barbecue chicken and drinking beer. Your mother and I promised we are going to teach you kids what this holiday is really about. Especially with what has been going on in our country, it seems like everyone has forgotten the true meaning of today,” Dad finished. a little upset. Dad didn’t get upset a lot but stuff like this made him mad.

"Daddy," Sadie said assuredly, "you know that the three of us all know the true meaning of the Fourth of July." "We know. that all of you know," Mom replied, putting her hand on Dad's shoulder. "Myself, and Dad especially, never want you kids to forget the real meaning of this holiday." Mom was the best at calming Dad down.

The girls and I kept eating our snacks, Mom and Dad sat next to each other. Dad's arm around Mom. Benny had fallen asleep on the blanket behind me. The sun had just tipped over the horizon, signaling that fireworks were a few moments away. This was my absolute favorite part of today. The fireworks were Dad's favorite part too. I looked back at Dad and straightened my hat. He winked back at me and straightened his hat as well.

In front of us it was now completely dark and four spotlights were turned on, shining on the four American flags. The flags waved back and forth in the warm summer breeze. Slowly, that summer breeze carried the smell of fireworks until everyone in the crowd caught a whiff of gunpowder floating through the air.

Then like every Fourth of July, the first firework shot off. No announcement was made and the crowd began to ooh and ahh. The light show went off in an unexpected rhythm knowing people like me and Dad would want all night to see them. I would want" all night because I could lose myself in the endless show of color. Just when the last firework had exploded and disappeared into the dark sky, the next one already took its place. Standing up at the sky I felt like I couldn't blink because if I did, I might miss something. When the biggest fireworks began to fill the sky I knew they were the last few. It was the grand finale. I liked to think that every fallen soldier was watching the fireworks with us. I liked to hope that they were proud of the country they fought or died for. I was proud of the country I lived in, the country my father fought for, and the country whom I would spend my life upholding its' honor. Making sure everyday citizens who made the ultimate sacrifice would not be forgotten.