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New York

Last Journey

A Father and Son in Wartime

Darrell Griffin, Sr.

Chapter I

Getting the News

Cemetery Memorial

May 2007—Los Angeles National Cemetery

DARRELL R
GRIFFIN Jr
S SGT
US ARMY
IRAQI FREEDOM
MAR 13 1971
MAR 21 2007
BSM w V PH KIA
BELOVED HUSBAND
SON AND BROTHER

I am standing at the grave of SSG Darrell Griffin, Jr., my son, reading the same words I have read every Sunday for the last month. BSM stands for Bronze Star Medal, w V means that the Bronze Star was awarded under circumstances of valor, PH stands for Purple Heart, and KIA stands for killed in action. It took about a month after Skip's death for his headstone to be carved and placed at his grave. While waiting for his headstone to arrive, the cemetery placed an index-sized card in a green, waterproof frame at the head of his grave. It said: *Grave No. A 15, Section 89A, Darrell R. Griffin, Date of Death, 03/21/2007.* Too brief a grave marker and too brief a life.

Darrell's family called him Skip; his wife, Diana, called him Darrell; and his military comrades called him Griff. Not only did Skip get stuck with my complete name with a "Jr." at the end, but he also got stuck with my nickname. When he was younger he was called Little Skip and I was called Big Skip. Skip grew to be six feet two and two hundred forty pounds of solid muscle. Then the family referred to him as Big Skip and me as Old Skip.

I normally come to visit Skip's grave every Sunday before church. Kim, Skip's mom, often comes with me. I have only missed a couple of weekends since he was buried.

The smell of his favorite incense, Nag Champa, which I just lit and placed in front of his headstone, wafts in the air. I like that fragrance. He loved to burn incense in his study while he was reading books by his favorite authors—John Calvin, Friedrich Nietzche, Reinhold Niebuhr, St. Augustine, Nicholas Berdyaev, Jacques Ellul, and the other philosophers and theologians whose works

he pored over with a graduate student's zeal—though he'd never finished high school. Sometimes I'll bring one of his favorite books and read out loud to him if no one is around.

I wrap the lighter and remaining incense and put it in the "Skip Toolbox." This is a small gardener's toolbox that contains all the items we need when we come to visit Skip: pruning shears, paper towels and spray cleaner to wipe off the bird droppings, clippers for trimming the long grass from around the headstone, and, of course, incense and a lighter. I got the idea of the Skip Toolbox from watching the other families that come regularly to visit their sons here. Since we come to visit Skip every week, we keep the toolbox in the trunk of the car.

Last Sunday, I noticed that the man parking next to me had a similar toolbox. He had the same basic accessories, but he also had a number of cigars. When Skip was in Iraq, Diana and Kim used to send cigars to him every month. Most pictures of Skip taken in Iraq are of him smoking a cigar. So I decided to buy some cigars and occasionally smoke one when I visit his grave. These small acts make me feel closer to Skip.

A lot of graves only have flowers on them during the first week. I assume many of these are the graves of soldiers whose families live out of town. Or maybe the first week is enough for most people. Skip was buried beside Christopher Dwayne Young, who did not have his headstone when we buried Skip next to him. Now his headstone reads that he was killed during Iraqi Freedom a few weeks before Skip, when he was twenty-one years old. He was old enough

to die for his country and old enough to have a beer if he wanted one. Since Skip was buried, he and Christopher have been joined by another soldier, Walter Freeman, who was killed on April 4, a few weeks after Skip. Walter was also a casualty of Iraqi Freedom. He was just a couple of months younger than Christopher.

The Los Angeles National Cemetery is a United States National Cemetery in West Los Angeles, at the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Sepulveda Boulevard. Soldiers and their spouses whose graves date back to the Civil War are buried here. Interred also are veterans from the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and other American conflicts. One of my son's "neighbors" is Nicholas Porter Earp (1813–1907). He was the father of Old West lawmen Wyatt Earp, Virgil Earp, and Morgan Earp. Section 13 grave A-18. More than 85,000 soldiers and spouses are buried here.

We had the option of burying Skip at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. We selected the Los Angeles Cemetery so that we can visit him weekly. We have a good friend who lost her son in a helicopter crash in Iraq in 2005. He was buried in a group grave at Arlington with four other soldiers who had died in the crash because they couldn't tell which body parts belonged to which soldier. She wishes she had buried him in Los Angeles. I didn't ask her, but I was curious if she had a choice of where he was buried since he was in a group grave. Two of the other people buried with him were Iraqi soldiers.

Kim likes to drive to the hill in the cemetery that overlooks Skip's grave. When we get out of the car and stand looking

at his grave site from the distant hill, for an instant it's as if it hadn't really happened, as if he were still alive.

I always expect to see a lot more flowers. It seems like the same few graves always have flowers on them. Skip gets fresh flowers every weekend, and so do a couple of his graveside neighbors. Today, Kim is placing flowers in front of Skip's headstone in one of the little cones that the cemetery provides for this purpose. She also brought some for Christopher. We often find on Skip's grave the same bouquet of flowers that has been put on Christopher's. We assume Christopher's family has been bringing Skip flowers, and we often reciprocate the gesture. We have varied the times we come to visit Skip to increase the chances of meeting them, but we haven't seen them yet. Although we may see the same people at the cemetery, there seems to be an unwritten rule that we don't talk to each other. There is the normal quiet and dignified nod as we pass one another, but rarely any conversation.

We always take a photograph with our cell phone of the fresh flowers we just placed on Skip's grave and then send it to Diana, Skip's wife. Since she lives at Fort Lewis, Washington, and can't visit Skip's grave very often, it seems to give her some comfort every time we send her a picture. She likes knowing we are taking care of Skip.

Besides Christopher's family or friends sometimes putting flowers on Skip's grave, another odd thing we have noticed is that there are often three or four new pennies, always face up, on top of Skip's headstone. We know they are new because the "tail" sides that aren't exposed to the elements are still shiny. I have noticed this a few times on

other soldiers' headstones, but they are fairly consistently placed on Skip's.

These are the little questions that perplex me.

There are also bigger questions.

Questions such as *Why did my son have to go to war?* And *Why did he die?* And *What did he die for?* These seem like simple, straightforward questions, but they are not. They were the subject of numerous conversations that Skip and I had over the course of several years. Philosophy, theology, and politics were our favorite topics. Most fathers and sons like to go hunting and to sporting events together; they like to talk about cars. Our favorite father-son activity was to spend an entire evening talking about books—once Skip was old enough, over a bottle of merlot. We called it The Great Conversation.

I was sixteen when Skip's sister Rene was born, and eighteen when Skip was born. I spent most of my time doing jobs like washing dishes while finishing high school and college. Because these jobs never paid very well, there wasn't much money to buy toys. A good, cheap form of entertainment was for me to take Skip and Rene to the library or to buy them used books. They both loved to read.

I say good-bye to Skip and stand up to walk back to my car. I notice that the incense has burned a hole in the little army flag that someone had placed by Skip's headstone. Now it says: "United States Arm."

As I get in my car, I remember a favorite quotation of Skip's: "Of all the sorrows that afflict mankind, the bitterest is this, that one should have consciousness of much, but control over nothing." —Herodotus.