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John Craun

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## Memory and The Lemon Tree

JOHN CRAUN

*To listen to the story [of Lemon's trick-or-treating], especially as Rat Riley told it you'd never know that Curt Lemon was dead. He was still out there in the dark, naked and painted up, trick-or-treating, sliding from hooch to hooch in that crazy white ghost mask. But he was dead.*

Why do people tell war stories? What are they good for? If the literal truth of war stories is irrelevant, as Tim O'Brien asserts, then what purpose do they serve? Why is the story of Curt Lemon trick-or-treating so important to Rat Riley? *The Things They Carried* is a powerful and graceful book that moves on a thin edge with delicate balance—it is composed of stories and at the same time it is about stories. Many of the stories O'Brien tells in *The Things They Carried* involve the death of a fellow soldier. These stories are obviously important to O'Brien, and I feel they are very moving. To better understand what O'Brien's war stories are about, I want to examine the story of the death of Curt Lemon. Because Lemon's story is scattered in small pieces throughout the book (style taking the form of the event), I want to focus specifically on the letter which was Rat Riley's reaction to Lemon's death.

Rat Riley was one of Lemon's closest friends. The chapter titled "How to Tell a True War Story" begins with a story about the letter that Rat wrote to Lemon's sister after Lemon was killed by a land mine. In the letter, Rat tells several stories to illustrate Lemon's fun-loving disposition. In the end, Rat pours his heart out to her, saying how close he and Lemon were. Of course, what Rat wrote in the letter may or may not have been true. Rat may or may not have written a letter. There may or may not have been a Rat Riley. It does not matter. The truth is unimportant. So what is the story of Curt Lemon about? "It's about love and memory."

The story of Rat's letter shows the importance of communicating through stories and the relation of stories to memory. Rat needed to share his grief with someone in a similar position, someone who was as close to Lemon as he was, someone who would understand. Rat grew up with Lemon in the jungles of Vietnam and he

needed to communicate with another person who had grown up with Lemon, so his sister was a natural choice. Memories are something that the soldiers in Vietnam carried and memories of the dead are heavy. Sharing these memories made them lighter and easier to bear. The load could be terribly heavy to carry alone.

Communication with Lemon's sister was also important to Rat because she provided a living link to Lemon's life. In her, he was still alive. When a person we are close to dies, we have lost his body. We can no longer see, feel, or hear him, but we have to hold on to him in some way. We cannot bear to lose him entirely. What we have left is their soul and it is the function of memory to preserve this. For Rat, Lemon's sister provided a physical point to which his soul could be attached so it wouldn't be lost. Physical objects can be a very important part of the process of remembering the dead. O'Brien demonstrates this when he keeps his friend Kiowa's moccasins after he dies. Stories can provide the same kind of attachment point, a space for a soul to reside. O'Brien says that stories are "a way of making new bodies for the souls to inhabit." Stories preserve soul and life. Over time, the face and the personality of the deceased fades away, but a good story contains the essence of the person. It can "revive at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging." Stories have a permanence that human life does not. "Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing left to remember except the story."

Rat needed someone to listen to his stories, someone to affirm them, and thus affirm Lemon's life. In memory, imagination, dream, and fact blend together. Telling a story saves events and people from drifting into unreality. Making Curt Lemon real to someone else makes him more real to Rat. Stories externalize; they give the dead an existence outside of our own heads. O'Brien says, "The thing about telling a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness."

Remembering the dead, preserving their souls, and keeping them alive is vitally important because it keeps us from drifting into unreality. The people that we share our lives with become part of us as we become part of them. Keeping them alive preserves us. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien says, "stories are for joining the past to the future." Since we live at the juncture of past and future, stories locate us. Stories are the mass which fills our memory, providing weight to make us solid and grounded. They give us place and substance. Without them we weigh nothing and are nothing. Stories can save us, and to Tim O'Brien *The Things They Carried* is finally "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

## Sources

All quotations are from:

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried* Penguin Books, New York, New York. 1991.