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The Mother

The very same day the newspaper editors were preparing my article for print, I was on an airplane. My ticket was for Sioux Falls, South Dakota, but I was going to Niobrara, Nebraska, to meet the mother who had lost her three sons on the USS *Frank E. Evans*. It was a long way from California, yet I wanted to start there, with Eunice Sage.

The roads to Niobrara from Sioux Falls are long, flat, and straight, trees and pastures all around, cornfields in between. Before my trip I had spoken to Linda Vaa, Greg Sage's widow, who remarried in 1976 to a gentleman named Spencer Vaa, a Vietnam veteran who had been injured in early 1969 and whose unit had been nearly wiped out at Hamburger Hill. Linda was kind and helpful, telling me about the woman she considered a second mother. She said Eunice was a strong woman, and an honest one—brutally honest, if need be. She cussed sometimes, was the warning. "She tells it like it is," Linda explained, but added that Eunice was kind. "She's a very

special woman," she continued, one who would help anybody out. She was full of love, and both tough and tender, as she always had been. "She had to be, because she held everyone together after that."

Eunice smoked cigarettes, Linda said, and it might bother me after a while. I mentioned that I used to smoke, and that no, it wouldn't bother me. Linda's words were in my mind as my little red rental car zoomed past the long stretches, the miles and miles of nothing but beautiful green, on the roads between South Dakota and Nebraska. Somewhere along the way I stopped for coffee and, on impulse, a pack of Marlboro Lights.

I arrived at Eunice's apartment by 10:00 a.m. on Saturday and politely, lightly knocked on her door. Eunice was living in a low-income apartment in a series of squat connected brick buildings with metal-framed windows on a cul-de-sac in what was called the new Niobrara. The old town had been moved in the mid-1970s; its original location was too close to the Missouri River, and flooding was fast becoming too common. The wide Main Street and checkered small-town layout was now a patchy nine-hole golf course and empty, flat lands. Razed and gone, it had been the Niobrara that Gary, Greg, and Kelly Jo Sage had grown up in. Its Main Street was memory lane for Eunice. That town was gone, replaced, higher up a hill, by a new string of buildings that resembled a government park, planned and built by the Army Corps of Engineers. A lot of folks hated it and had moved away; Niobrara's population had plummeted to just 420, almost half of what it once was.

The farmhouse was gone, too. Ernest, Eunice, and little Doug had stayed there about six more years before leaving. The old house had become too big, and too sad; nobody went upstairs, and Doug took to sleeping on the sofa. To move on, maybe they had to move out. Ernest couldn't farm anymore; he had lost his will and strength. They relocated to a smaller house with an apple orchard and a garage for Kelly Jo's motorcycle, and later on to yet smaller houses, until finally they moved to this apartment. Ernest died in 1996. I knew Eunice lived alone, and that she was eighty-seven years old. So I knocked again, a little harder. Maybe I should come back, I thought. And then I heard the click of a lock.

When Eunice opened the door, the first thing I noticed were her sky-blue eyes—they immediately breathed life into the scenery, up until that moment only a prosaically bleak wooden door on a quiet street in a town in the middle of nowhere. Her thin gray hair was cut in a pixie, her skin fair and wrinkled, and her clothing drab. She was wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt—her pajamas, she would later say. Standing in the doorway, she was friendly yet reserved. She hadn't realized I would be coming so early, she said. The small tote bag on my shoulder felt heavier; I slumped a little. I can go away and come back later, I told her. "No," she said, "come on in."

The apartment had a simple, cozy feel. Standing in the doorway, I could see that it had one bedroom, a bathroom, a small eat-in kitchen, and an adjoining living room. The sofa was plaid, and felt rough to the touch. There was a little side chair with a blanket and a footrest. No photographs hung on the walls. And Linda was right: it smelled of cigarettes.

Eunice had been watching the news; Nebraska's Cornhuskers were playing that day, and she was waiting for the game to start. She invited me to sit down at the kitchen table and asked if I wanted coffee. I accepted, but insisted on getting it myself; I could see that she winced at every step. Her legs were swollen, she said, apologizing that she hadn't had time to clean, although there was no mess. That was the one frustrating thing about getting old, she said, your legs hurting so damn much. "I can't clean my own house," she told me, sitting across from me, looking down at the floor. Her accent was upper Midwest—Minnesotan—with long, exaggerated *o* sounds. And she said "damn" a lot.

We drank coffee out of milk-glass teacups, stained brown on the inside. It was the strongest coffee I had ever had, and Eunice drank hers pitch-black. The mood was just as concentrated, thick with silence. I saw an ashtray in the middle of the table and told her that I wouldn't mind her smoking. She didn't move, just drank her coffee.

"You're writing a book?"

I replied that I was.

And this woman who had lost three sons, a loss unfathomable to me, with two sons of my own, followed with an assessment born of old-age wisdom and the sort of experience that puts you in a league far from the rest of the world.

"Probably"—she paused, a smile peering through—"no one will read it."

I knew it wasn't personal. There had been many reporters over the years. By then I knew that a famous photographer

from *Life* magazine had come for the memorial service in 1969, yet the magazine hadn't used the photographs. "They said it was too much death," Linda told me on the phone before my trip to Niobrara. Usually reporters came on anniversaries of the *Evans* disaster: ten years, twenty-five years, thirty. In 1989 one had come all the way from Philadelphia, working on a piece for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Ernest was still alive back then, and the mood, I later found out, was similar to this one. There was this same uncomfortable silence, and no easy place to begin. Journalist Michael Ruane left Niobrara thinking that it was a long way to come for the one sentence the trip added to the story. Other reporters had come along when the issue of Vietnam Wall exclusion came to the forefront. "Bastards" she would later call those who'd kept the names of her sons and the seventy-one others off the wall.

Sitting there in brown wedge sandals and a conservative navy blue dress—attire a woman in town would later dub as "fancy" when she saw me in a nearby café—I was just another in the long string of journalists. I kept my notebook and tape recorder in my bag and thought maybe I ought to leave. My coffee was lukewarm and Eunice remained silent. I looked at this woman and thought about how much she had been through. The tragedy violated the natural order of things: parents were not supposed to outlive their children, and certainly not losing three in one blow. A broken man, Ernest went to a state hospital for about a week sometime after the memorial service in 1969. Within a year Eunice found herself bleeding profusely into the toilet. Something painful and abdominal, she thought, and told Ernest to let her be, that

she just wanted to die there in that white frame farmhouse on the hill. But there was Doug to care for. The little blond boy kept her alive, but her insides were torn. A hysterectomy, the removal of the very womb that had protected and nurtured her boys, followed.

The Sage family went to San Francisco later in 1970 to dedicate the new barracks at Naval Station Treasure Island. Eunice wept when she cut the ribbon in the foyer, her reflection in the immaculate floors of the new building showing a frail woman. Her legs were matchsticks, and her face was gaunt; she looked as if she was barely holding on. Sage Hall went on to house young Navy men for nearly two decades and would suffer the plagues of abandonment when the naval base was closed in the 1990s: graffiti, druggies, squatters, and small-time looters. The building, the entire base, the entire island, became a ghost town.

Ernest suffered a heart attack in the early 1990s and had to live in a retirement home. From that day in 1969 until the day he died, he never smiled again. Even in the couple's fiftieth wedding anniversary photo in 1996, Eunice had a smile on her face while Ernest stared into the camera, expressionless. A few months later he died. Finally, in that hospital bed a few towns away, Eunice saw him light up, as if the color was coming back in the sunlight through a window. It was a smile she hadn't seen in decades. That eighty-year-old Ernest died smiling because he was finally going to see his boys again became a part of family lore.

When Eunice was seventy-seven years old, the Veterans Administration took away her survivor benefits after

discovering that she'd held a part-time job washing dishes and cooking small meals for an elderly neighbor—older than she was, at least. The $6.50-an-hour job sent her about $100 over the income eligibility guidelines for such benefits. Instead of the monthly check stemming from the untimely loss of her three sons, one day she got a letter. Because she had not reported her additional income earlier, she would receive $15 instead of $400. She took the hit in stride, telling an *Omaha World-Herald* reporter, "I don't have anything fancy to eat or nothing else . . . but I can get by." The issue was corrected within a year, long after she quit that meager-wage job. "I shouldn't have been working," she told that reporter. "I just can't hardly stand it when I don't have anything to do."

I knew some of these stories before I drove into town that day in September 2010. I didn't know where to begin; Eunice was still quiet. The noise from the television in the living room was a welcome distraction, giving me a few minutes to think. The uncomfortable silence continued as I drank the strong, cold coffee and wondered, What now? What should I say? What should I ask? I couldn't just leave—this was a different sort of interview, and I knew it right then. Eunice had been the strong one in the family, the one who held it together. I was desperate to know her, for others to know her. I wanted to write her story. So I looked down at my bag, pushed aside my tape recorder and notebooks, fumbled around for that small gold-and-white box of Marlboro Lights, and asked her if I could smoke a cigarette. "Then I will, too," she said.

Eunice had started smoking in 1969. It calmed her nerves. When the news cameras left that summer and the Sages were

left with their thoughts, that's when it hit them. "The emptiest part of it all," the surviving son Doug would later confide in me. So over coffee and cigarettes, at a kitchen table in a small apartment it had taken me exactly one day to get to, I started to ask about her sons Gary, Greg, and Kelly Jo. What were they like? She told me that she didn't remember much; "it was a long time ago." Pictures? I continued, looking for a way in, a way to get Eunice to talk more. She said she had none; they'd lost a lot when the garage they used as storage flooded. "Damn water," she told me.

"Do you think of them?"

"Not much. You know, it was a long time ago," she repeated.

Oddly, she smiled a little. This woman was a sealed box, herself. I sat there and took a drag from my cigarette. True, it was an act for me, but I wanted Eunice to feel more comfortable. I hadn't smoked in years, and it was getting to me; I felt faint. Again I thought maybe I should leave. Then I thought about my boys and how profoundly motherhood had changed me. I often look at my boys and see them as part of me; they are physical parts of my body, but walking around outside it, discovering the world; living, laughing, and crying in it. They are separate creatures, but an invisible string holds me to them.

This powerful connection was beautiful and terrifying at the same time. This trip to Niobrara was my first time away from them, the farthest we had ever been from each other. I missed them, and I had cried a little the night before. I asked my husband over the phone in my hotel in South Dakota

whether I was doing the right thing. "I want to be home," I said. I could hear them laughing and chattering in the background, sweet voices asking their father for milk. It was their bedtime. "Think of the moms who never got to see their kids again," he replied.

Right then, at the kitchen table in the new Niobrara—the old town having disappeared, and with it so many stories—I looked at Eunice. I was now who she had been a lifetime ago. I was a mother; she was a mother.

The words were still in the air—*Not much. You know, it was a long time ago*—as I watched her drink her coffee and smoke her cigarette.

And I didn't believe her.

So I started talking. I rambled on about growing up in a house with three brothers, how they seemed to eat all the food, about how I now felt like I was always feeding my own kids, how they always seem to be hungry and that they would someday—I knew it—be just like my brothers. They'd eat everything.

"They sure do eat a lot," Eunice interrupted, laughing. She was smiling again. "I want to show you something." She stood up, winced a little, steadied herself. I stood up and asked whether I could help her. "Oh no, I got it." She walked toward a small pantry in her kitchen, opened it up, and reached down. She pulled out a cornflower-blue Dutch oven, its enamel scorched, faded by time, chipped along the rim. "I used to cook their potatoes in this," she explained, the heavy pot shaking a little in her frail clench. "You know, I like to keep a few old things from back then."

The morning continued just like that. We were two mothers talking about raising boys. We went to lunch at the new café, which featured signs and black-and-white photographs from Green's, the old one. Across the street was the town museum where local volunteers helped preserve artifacts of farm and country life. There was an intimate tribute to the Sages on a long folding table. There were photographs, newspaper clippings, and more.

"You want to go to the cemetery next?" Eunice asked. At this point I wanted her to stay put. Her legs were hurting, and she couldn't—wouldn't—sit still at home. Before we left for the café, I offered to pick lunch up and bring it to her, and she declined. When she said she needed milk and a few other groceries, I offered to get them for her.

"I can do it," she said, so we went to the store and I carried the bag to the car. Now, back in the car, she could at least sit. I could drive, and she could talk.

The cemetery gate was scrolled, wrought iron marked 1874 and crowned with metal letters spelling out L'Eau Qui Court. This had been the town's original name in French, "the water that rushes," before it took on the name Niobrara, an Indian word meaning "running water." The government had given the Sages three headstones for the boys, and Ernest's headstone sat to the right of the three. But the place meant little to Eunice, as far as the boys were concerned; after all, it wasn't their resting place. And Greg's middle name was spelled wrong, she told me. "It doesn't matter," she told me. There was perhaps another place that mattered more.

We found ourselves driving several miles west of town,

making a left turn just after the bridge over the Niobrara River. We took a long gravel road that passed over some small hills, bending to the right, winding amidst trees and tall grasses to where the farmhouse had been.

"Right there," Eunice told me, and I slowed down at a swath of bald land, patches of grass, and some trees. It looked like a place where something had once been. With eyes as blue as the sky as she squinted in the sunlight, Eunice pointed to a long driveway and smiled as if seeing an old friend. "There, that's it."

The house had been burned to the ground decades earlier. It had become infested with bats and, at three-quarters of a century old, was condemned. But the land was there, and so were the trees and hills. The sky. Things that couldn't be taken away. This was the place where they had last been together as a family. About a month after the memorial service in Niobrara in 1969 the Navy came across some photos of the boys, taken by a Navy public affairs photographer on the *Evans* on May 24, ten days before the collision. The official white envelope arrived in the weathered white mailbox along that country road one day, as if out of nowhere. They were black and white and glossy—real. It was mail call on the ship and Kelly Jo was opening up his birthday card a few days early—on May 29 he turned 19. The photographs showed three young and tall men, in dingy dungarees, Greg's cap tilted to the side while Gary stood stoic and Kelly Jo smiled under his own brim. The photographs were a part of what was left, and this place, a beautiful spot. Eunice and I stayed there awhile and talked.

Then there was another place she wanted to show me.

At the center of the new Niobrara sits the Sage Brothers Memorial, an official historical marker made of bronze and stone, mentioned in State of Nebraska guidebooks. A plaque told the story of the *Evans* and the boys who had served on it. At its center was the photograph the boys had taken as a Mother's Day gift for Eunice. The area around the memorial was cordoned off and surrounded by benches, a semicircle crowned by tall flagpoles on which flapped the colors of Nebraska, the United States, and each branch of the armed forces. Eunice told me about the day in 1999 that they moved it to the center of town. Originally the monument had been near the high school, but there it had been lost in the tall brush and grasses. A few local veterans decided to raise funds to move it to this more prominent spot. Just before the rededication ceremony, Eunice had come here alone and wept; it was then that she felt something lifting from her shoulders. There was a release, she said. "Things changed after that."

About a dozen survivors of the shipwreck attended the ceremony in 1999. Sometime after that the members of the USS *Frank E. Evans* Association began pooling their money to pay for Eunice to attend their reunions. Over the years she became a special guest, the "mother of the association." When she arrived at the hotel for the reunion, however late, the wives of the veterans would inquire, "Can we help you, Mrs. Sage? Do you want to go to your room and rest awhile?" The answer was always the same: "I want a cigarette. I want a drink. And I want my boys."

People in Niobrara saw a change in Eunice. "When those boys started showing up," said a townsperson, "she really perked up." Survivor Bob Mason and his wife Dixie sent her

a small, boxed Christmas tree every year, already decorated. Somebody—it was never known who—paid her tab at the grocery in town. The veterans called her on her birthday and sent her cards. I learned that the previous week one had "come through town and stopped along the way" to visit her. Dean Wyse lived in Arizona; it would have been a long way for him to come, to simply be passing through town on his way to somewhere else. Even an Australian sailor paid her a visit. "I lost three sons but gained a hundred," Eunice would say.

By nightfall on my first day in Niobrara, Eunice and I had gotten past the awkwardness. She told me stories about her boys, the fights they used to have, the quarrels that seemed to rattle the entire house. "Might have been okay with just two of them, but three, that made it a little hectic." She talked a lot about Doug, then forty-eight years old and about to remarry. Things were hard for Doug as a young child; it was years before he really understood that his brothers were never coming home. Whenever a newscaster mentioned Vietnam little Doug would run to the television set and wait. Cruel kids at school teased him, and he got into a lot of fights. He'd later admit that he always felt he needed to stand up for his brothers; throughout his life they'd been like ghosts, invisible but always present. Doug would grow to six foot three by his senior year in high school, and one of his high school football jerseys bore the number 74. He played in a small stadium named after his brothers, on the same grass where they had played. Doug, however, was a massive player; the *Niobrara Tribune,* in the caption accompanying a photograph of Doug knocking another player over, once called him the "monster man."

After high school Doug enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He

wanted to go where his brothers had gone, that exact spot in the South China Sea. He wanted to be with them. But he didn't stay in past boot camp. It was an honorable discharge, with various rationales attached—the Department of Defense's sole survivor policy being one of them.

In September 2010 Eunice was getting ready to attend a wedding in the fall. Doug was getting married again. "You want to see my dress?" I followed her into her small, modest bedroom, where there was a bed, a dresser, and, on the wall, four eight-by-ten pictures of her sons, their senior-year portraits. There were the three black-and-white portraits of handsome boys with side-combed hair, and then one portrait in orange-hued color off to the right, as if it had been taken in another lifetime. Doug was handsome and burly, with wispy, feathered hair.

"I have Doug's uniform here," she said, pulling out from her closet a heavy set of sailor dress blues, a fine layer of dust on the shoulders. I touched the uniform, feeling its rough wool. "Poor Doug," Eunice said, and told me of his struggles as the remaining brother. Ernest was not the same father to Doug that he had been to the other boys. He was less alive, not as funny, and he didn't take his youngest boy fishing much. Ernest was stuck on one subject; everything always came down to the boys. As Linda Vaa explained to me once, "Ernest would just sit there and cry and say, 'My boys, all my boys are gone,' and Doug would say, in an innocent assertion of a small child, 'I'm your boy. I'm here.' " Eunice told me Doug was going to the ship's annual reunion in San Diego in a week; she hoped it might help him the way the reunions had helped her. "I hope maybe Doug can get something out of it." There was tenderness

in the way she spoke of Doug. A mother, I know, wants to make a child's wounds better. We want to fix things. And Doug was sad, she told me. Sad the way Ernie was. "They'd just go off and cry somewhere," she said.

Eunice put the uniform back in the closet, leaned in and pulled out a rose-colored woman's suit. Underneath she'd wear a floral button-down blouse, she told me. She didn't think she could wear any other shoes than the ones she had on now. She looked down and there was a pause, and then she looked back in the closet. She put the suit back. Leaning on the frame of the closet, she slid the hollow wood door shut, and reached over to slide open the other side. It was piled knee-high with boxes and an old sky-blue suitcase sat off to the side; on top of one box was a pair of old snow boots.

"You want to see something?" She pointed to the boxes and suitcase and took a seat on her bed, directing me to take them out of the closet. Layers of dust sat on the suitcase, as I knelt down and opened it. Papers and more spilled out. The boxes were small, yet also filled to the brim. These contents were all she had left of her three oldest sons; letters and photographs, high school memorabilia. I was hesitant but at Eunice's urging, I started pulling out musty albums, books, and loose photographs and took a seat on the floor. In that moment the three Sage brothers, to me photographs on a wall looking over us, had gone three-dimensional. There were a few letters and Kelly Jo's drawing books, some yellowing and marked by water. Kelly Jo owned a steel watchband bracelet with his name engraved on it. I held it in my hands as Eunice watched. I was taken aback by the baby pictures; at that moment, I thought of my own two sons. There was, I suddenly realized, about the

same age difference between them as there had been between Gary and Greg.

The next morning I paid another visit, and there we were again, two mothers talking about life with children, a lifetime between us. It's how I got Eunice's story, by talking about my own.

"Where are your kids now?" she asked over lunch at the café in town.

"Home in California with my husband."

"You better get there soon. It's going to be a mess."

By late afternoon it was time for me to get on the road to make my flight out of Sioux Falls. Eunice had given me a few bundles of letters and photographs; I could try to have some stains removed from one of the photographs, I told her. It was a baby picture of Greg and Gary, with pudgy faces and old-fashioned white leather "walking" shoes. Of course I thought of my own boys when I saw that photograph. I still couldn't grasp how Eunice had gotten on with life after the wreck of the *Evans*.

As I was saying good-bye, I turned to her and asked, "Mrs. Sage, what was the one thing you want people to know about your sons?" It was a broad question, but one I felt inclined to ask after our two days of storytelling, laughter, and tears.

Eunice looked at me and said, "They were ordinary American boys."

Twelve days later Eunice died. A blood clot had broken loose in her pained legs and run up to her heart. And it was those surviving shipmates who helped carry her casket. Her boys.