intima a journal of narrative medicine

NON-FICTION | FALL 2022

Always Fine

By Jane Ratcliffe

A tabletop mounted on a wall in a furniture showroom fell on my head. I'd been helping out the owner for the week, and a nagging premonition had told me not to go near the manager's desk, placed underneath the tabletop. My co-workers teased me for my avoidance, but at the last minute of my last day, I waltzed to her desk for a stamp. And *bam*.

I left the Emergency Room unseen after waiting hours. In the nineties, football players and soldiers weren't all over the news yet, warning people about head injuries. Only much later did I become aware of the permanent brain injury from untreated concussions. At this point, I had no idea what my life would become. I was strong, healthy. The child of war parents. I could handle a staggering headache.

My mom had slept in a London bomb shelter and felt and heard the Doodlebugs and V-2s fall around her; she watched her city burn. Her mum, my gran, admonished the children before they left for school or work or errands to "run all the way and dodge the shrapnel."

My dad evacuated and barely saw his family for four years. He also dodged the shrapnel of a different life when he returned.

They lived on rations, mended holes in socks, ducked into tube stations and alleys when the bombers surged forth, wondered if their brothers who were old enough to fight were still alive.

And yet, they found joy. My mom and her sisters danced with American soldiers, stayed up telling stories in the Anderson shelter, hid under the kitchen table during bombings, and shrieked when a mouse joined them. My dad swam in rivers alongside cows. Rode around London in an American Army Jeep. Picked hops on a farm for the war effort. Pinched bits of a downed Heinkel bomber.

"What'll we do for fun now?" my mom asked her sister on VJ Day.

I grew up longing to be in a war. As a younger child, all I saw was the camaraderie, the adventure, and the bravery. The pure pluck of staying alive while bombs tumbled down and your city burned. Later, as a teen, my life felt suburban and safe, despite my penchant for punk rock. In my twenties, thirties and forties, I lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and even my wildness felt shielded, contained. Until September 11. First Lady Michelle Obama once said the presidency reveals who you are. Long before she uttered this, I intuitively felt as much about war. Some part of me, a part stuck deep to the bone, felt I needed to be in a war to reveal myself.

And then I was. My war was in my body.

The same body that in utero had absorbed the lingering chemicals of my parents' war. The body that had listened to my parents jollify the bombs. The body that knew: To survive you do not go down, even for the flash of a gasp. When WWII broke out, London's dance halls flourished. As German bombs rained down, blowing out windows and rattling walls, bands continued playing, and dancers kept jitterbugging—brazenly emblematic of their endurance, fortitude, and stubborn refusal to give into aggression and hardship. These were my people.

I channeled my heritage when the damage to my head and brain injury set in. Years of rooms flipping and spinning, my head an immovable vice of debilitating pain, loss of concentration, memory, sleep. I survived second to second. I began to imagine that this was how my parents might have lived, this fragile, buried, unspeakable desire for relief.

While doctors cautioned my health would only worsen, I kept myself alive and sane and slowly improving with a modest daily agenda (walk one block, write one paragraph, email one person) and a lot of powering through it. I ingested Churchill's quotes like vitamins: "Never surrender." "If you're going through hell, keep going." "Nations which went down fighting rose again, but those who surrendered tamely were finished." I would rise again.

But part of how my parents survived, I realize now, was to shut down fear, grief, horror. To drive those feelings deep into their bodies where they became encased in muscles and membranes and cells. And everything became fine. Always fine.

After the tabletop fell on my head, I was fine, too.

Until I became so ill I almost died.

For two decades, I approached my head and brain injury as a battle to be won. I punished my body, angry with her for taking so long to heal. I prioritized physical healing protocols over mental and emotional ones. I shut down my emotions, telling myself I could access them later when I was healthy.

"Why would you do that?" my friend asked.

I answered, "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

Last year, I started trauma therapy. I thought we would focus on vertigo and pain and isolation. Instead, it's war. How it lives on in me. Research shows how the next generation carries what the war generation could not release. How it messes with our cortisol, keeps us in untethered distress, exhausting our bodies and making it harder to heal. This notion of intergenerational trauma blew my mind; I had only viewed my parents' war experiences as aspirational, never diminishing, especially not to me.

We carry our personal experiences of aloneness or despair. And, being raised by war survivors, parents who are depressed or anxious from their own trauma, we carry the cultural weight of

history. Trauma dumping, my therapist calls it. If the person who experienced the trauma cannot process it, it's passed on to the next generation, and so on, until it is healed. I still struggle to fully understand how a bomb dropping on my dad's house makes it more difficult for my body to heal from a tabletop falling on my head. And yet my body understands completely.

"Your body is storing these narratives as if they are your own," my therapist explained. "When the impact of trauma like WWII is minimized, it affects the children, who absorb them as you did. Their lives were not 'absolutely fine.' "

Together, we identified parts of myself stuck at different ages in various parts of my body (tight chest, jangled solar plexus) and she would ask me to locate them in place. I would see three-year-old Jane in a bomb shelter or fifteen-year-old Jane on the streets of London as buildings burned. "This makes no sense," I would say, "I wasn't in the war." And she would explain that my nervous system had been entrained with my mother's so that I, too, had become hyper-alert to danger.

At first, I resisted, perhaps out of loyalty to the family lore, perhaps out of fear of losing an attachment to a war I hadn't even lived through. But eventually, I found myself doing the work of disentangling my nervous system from experiences that don't belong to me.
I remain a dedicated fighter. I believe my body will always know my parents' war. But the war I've been fighting in my body, *against* my body, has been misguided. At night now, I sit on the couch and listen. My body tells me her story. "I'm sorry," I say. "I love you." And together we slowly heal.

Jane Ratcliffe is a writer whose work has appeared in New England Review, O, the Oprah Magazine, the Sun Magazine, Al Jazeera, Creative Nonfiction, Longreads, Narratively amongst others and has received Notables Mentions in Best American Essays. Ratcliffe holds an MFA from Columbia University. She has a newsletter of interviews with fellow authors, which Substack highlighted as a Featured Publication: janeratcliffe.substack.com