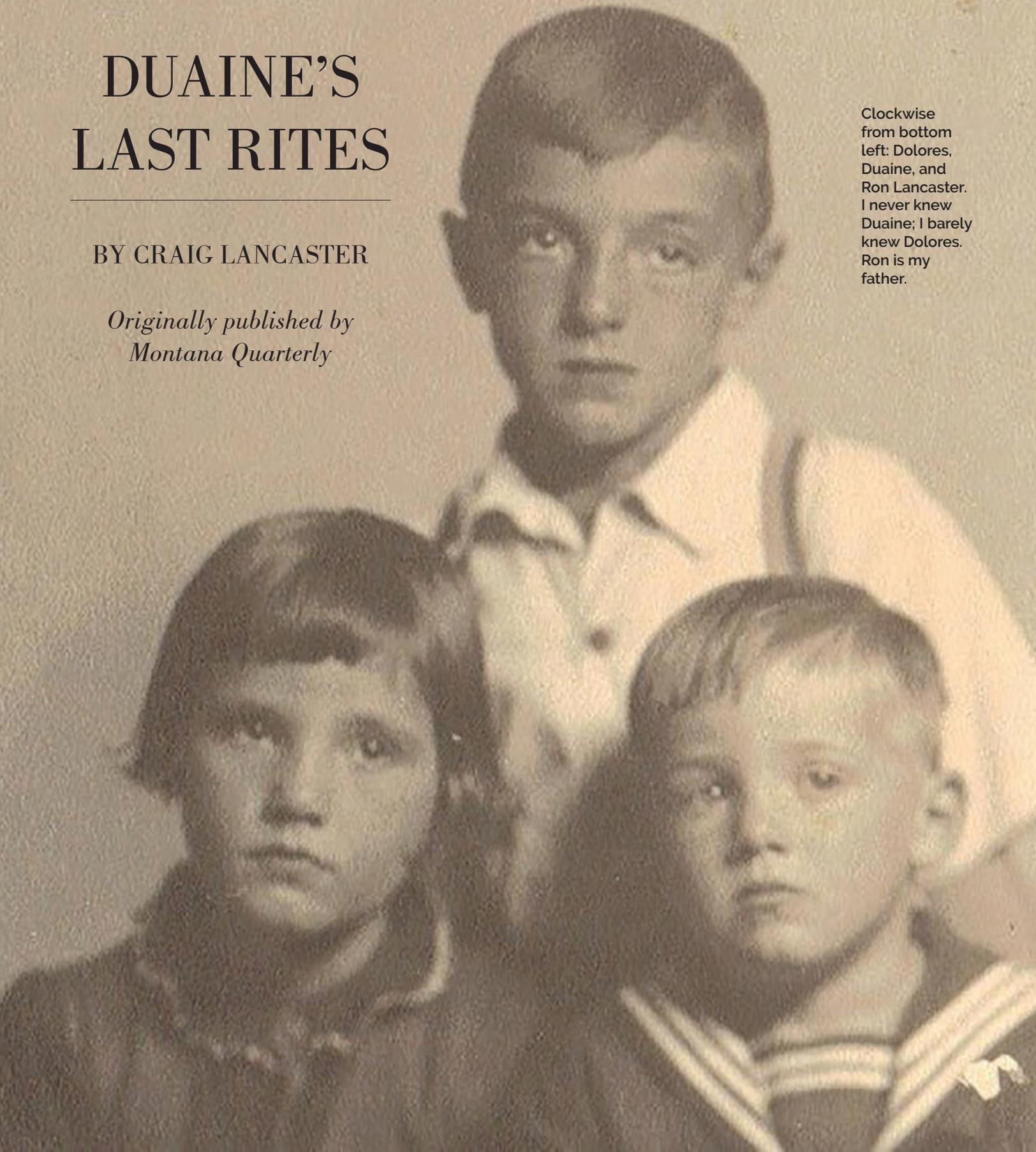


DUAINE'S LAST RITES

BY CRAIG LANCASTER

*Originally published by
Montana Quarterly*

Clockwise
from bottom
left: Dolores,
Duaine, and
Ron Lancaster.
I never knew
Duaine; I barely
knew Dolores.
Ron is my
father.





Duaine
Lancaster,
undated

IT'S MID-OCTOBER 2014, and in my grief over a love gone bad, I've pointed my car west, toward Seattle. I'm headed there because my best friend has told me to come, using the kind of language you reserve for someone you care about when you don't recognize him anymore and are scared of what he might be thinking. "Goddammit, just get in your car and come here," he's told me, and so that's what I'm doing.

It's late morning, and I'm west of Spokane, about to lurch into the hypnotic sameness of central Washington, when I remember the name of a town I've only read about, the resting place of an uncle I never knew, a connection to the father whose story I've spent much of my adult life trying to reconstruct.

I pull over, and I punch "Creston" into my GPS program, and the satellites tell me I can get off at the next exit and start working my way north and east. A few miles ahead, I leave the interstate and make my way into the lonely corners and igneous-rock outcroppings of northern Washington.

DUAINE LEROY LANCASTER WAS BORN MARCH 8, 1936, in Conrad, Montana. He died December 22, 1972, in Spokane, Washington. The basic facts of commencement and benediction are easy enough to discover. It's everything in the middle—who he was, what he sounded like, whether he was generous or mean, if he preferred dogs or cats—that's harder to get at.

His younger brother, my father, likes to tell of the time he smashed Duaine in the face with a two-by-four, a stealth attack undertaken while Duaine's hair was being cut by their mother. When I ask Dad why he did it, he says, matter-of-factly, "Because he rubbed cow shit in my face." It's a funny story only if you imagine it as a cartoon, and only if you don't know the larger context. The young lives of Duaine and Ron Lancaster, and of their sister, Delores, were unspeakably harsh. Their stepfather, Dick Mader, kept them in line with beatings. I've heard the story from a cousin about Dad showing up on her doorstep, his back flayed by Dick's whip, on one of his many unsuccessful runaway attempts. Duaine, she says, had it even worse, being the oldest.

I have one photo of the siblings together, taken in the early 1940s. There is no mirth in their faces, no childlike wonder. It's haunting, and over the years I've learned enough about their lives to know why.

Duaine and Delores are gone, and Dad, now 76, doesn't part with words or emotions easily. When I ask him what he remembers about his brother, he says, simply, "Duaine was all right."

I take the same question to my mother, whose life has been untangled from those of the Lancasters (save me) for 42 years, and I get an answer steeped in violence.

"I remember that when we went to Kalispell for Dick's funeral"—this would have been 1966, four years before I was born—"Ron and Duaine got into a fistfight during the wake."

ONCE I REACH CRESTON, I'm there perhaps a half-hour. I see not a single soul. The cemetery sits on gently sloping hillside, and there the interment directory tells me that if I walk a few yards down from where I've parked, I should find Duaine's plot.

Instead, I locate the neighboring headstones and an unmarked patch of yellow grass where Duaine's resting place is supposed to be. My mind flashes on a picture I have somewhere at home, a pile of graveside roses. Dad took that, or maybe Mom did. After Duaine was struck



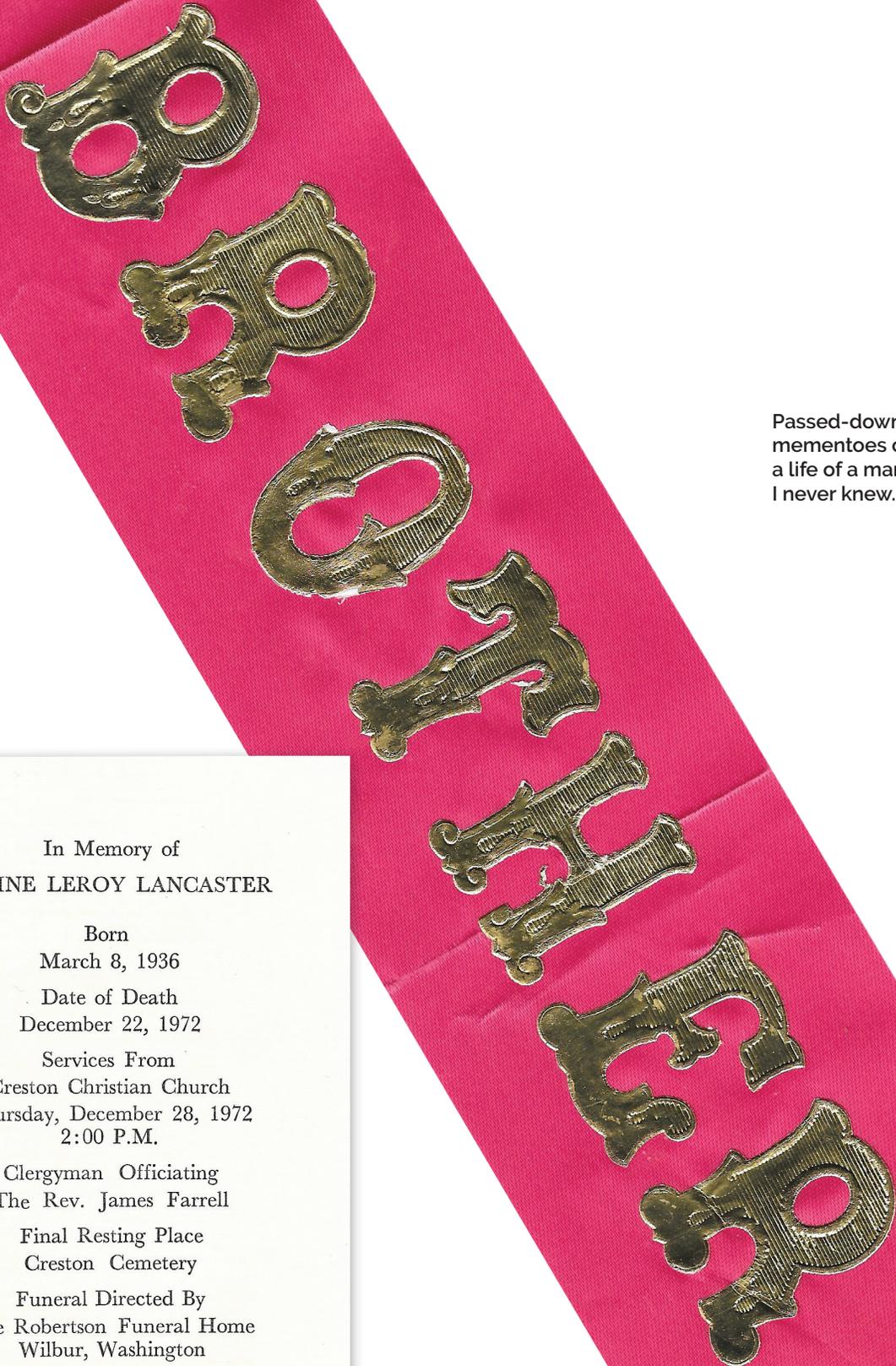
Graveside, 1972

by a panel truck while working on a survey crew in Idaho, Dad had shut down his drilling business, and he and Mom had traveled from their home in Wyoming to Spokane to keep vigil at the hospital. Weeks went by—“I learned to love crossword puzzles, sitting in that hospital,” Mom says, 43 years later—and then Duaine died. A few days after that, my folks went to Creston to see him into the earth on December 28, 1972. Near as I can tell, nobody on our side of the family has ever been back.

Now I’m here, and no one passing this spot would have any evidence of Duaine’s life, and I’ve never felt so alone.

DUAINE HAD FIVE CHILDREN—sons Ricky, Russell and Robby, and daughters Melinda and Shelly. I’d known their names for a long time; my curiosity about this unconnected family of mine far predates my spur-of-the-moment swing to their father’s gravesite. But try as I might, in this Internet age when you can learn seemingly anything about anybody, I hadn’t been able to track them down. By the time Duaine died, his family had scattered. The boys and Melinda were in Oklahoma City with their mother, Myrna. Shelly, married young and with her own life and new last name, was in Green Mountain Falls, Colorado.

And then, in a single afternoon, what and who I know changed. My Aunt Delores’ daughter Vickie came to Billings to see Dad, and we compared our meager family notes. A single surname—that of Duaine’s ex-wife, Myrna, after her second marriage—emerged from deep in Vickie’s memories. A short online search led to Myrna, back in Montana after decades away, and a line on all of her children. My cousins. That Myrna didn’t recognize my name when I introduced myself hardly seemed notable. I knew hers and I knew Duaine’s, and thus we had a place to start our conversation.



Passed-down
mementoes of
a life of a man
I never knew.

In Memory of
DUAINE LEROY LANCASTER

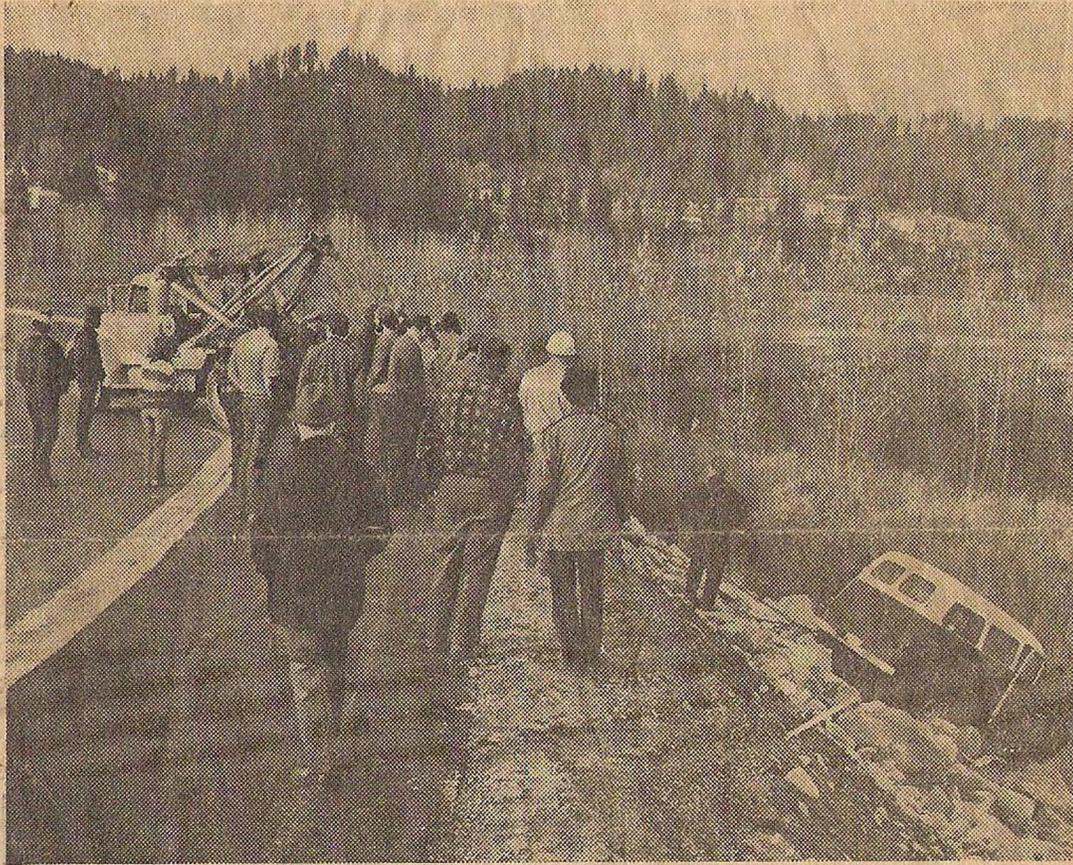
Born
March 8, 1936
Date of Death
December 22, 1972

Services From
Creston Christian Church
Thursday, December 28, 1972
2:00 P.M.

Clergyman Officiating
The Rev. James Farrell

Final Resting Place
Creston Cemetery

Funeral Directed By
The Robertson Funeral Home
Wilbur, Washington



Worker Hurt

A wrecker prepares to retrieve the truck of Henry Mott, 76, of Bonners Ferry, from rocks of the new U.S. Highway 95 bypass at the northern Idaho community. Idaho State Police said the vehicle struck Duwaine Lancaster, 36, Creston, Wash., a road worker as he stood on the curb 30 feet

north of the Burlington Northern overpass. Lancaster is reported in critical condition with a head injury and receiving intensive care at Sacred Heart Hospital, Spokane. ISP officer Mike Brink said Mott had no driver's license because he did not meet vision requirements. (Valley photo.)

A newspaper clipping that shows the scene of the accident that killed Duaine. He didn't die instantly; it was a long, slow death in a Spokane, Washington, hospital.

I have much to tell these people. About how pulling at strings on the Internet has led me to other people who knew Duaine. About what I know of his family of origin, the bits and pieces I've put together over the past 20 or so years, and the large gaps that remain in the puzzle. About the old man who lives downstairs from me, the last living sibling of their father.

About how I'd like to know them, because they connect to Duaine, and Duaine connects to my father. About how I'm desperate to find those links, because I know that when Dad's gone, I won't have my father anymore, just as they haven't had their father for most of their lives.

AFTER A THERAPEUTIC WEEK IN SEATTLE, I come home to Billings with the idea that I'll get a headstone placed for Duaine, that perhaps I can do this one small thing to mark that he was here and he mattered. A nice man at Strate Funeral Home in Davenport, Washington, pulls the record and tells me that I can get a free headstone from the government on account of Duaine's Marine Corps service, which I don't even know about.

I put in the paperwork with the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, claiming Duaine on behalf of Dad, and weeks later I have more fodder for the paper trail. Duaine went into the service on November 13, 1953, as a 6-foot-tall, 165-pound private and was discharged under honorable conditions a little more than three months later, on February 27, 1954, for an undisclosed medical reason. It's not much of a service record, but it's enough to get him a grave marker and a certificate of commendation from President Barack Obama. The present-day events roll out slowly, as we head into winter and a new year. The headstone is ordered, and etched, and placed, and in spare moments here and there, I keep talking to Dad and digging away online.

I'VE HAD A CRINKLED, yellowing copy of Duaine's *Great Falls Tribune* obituary for a couple of decades; it sits in a photo album along with the two grainy, at-a-distance shots I have of him from his adult years. It wasn't until I received a different obituary, from someone who knew Duaine at the end of his life, that I came across a revelatory detail about our family. Among the listed survivors are the ones I always knew about and one whose story was a long time in completing. The obit I was given lists a Fred Lancaster—father to Duaine, Delores and Dad—as a survivor, but there's no other information, like where he lived. That's because no one knew the answer.



My father's father (Fred) and mother (Della), shown in an undated photo I would have never received had I not found my long-lost cousins.

Fred last shows up in the family story in the mid-1950s, after Dad ran away from his mother and stepfather's dairy farm near Simms, Montana—this time for good—and reconnected with him. Fred saw Dad into the Navy and then went on his way, and it wasn't until I did an online search of the Social Security Death Index in the late 1990s that we discovered what happened to him. He moved to Oregon, married a woman named May Belle, and died in June 1970. In December 1972, Fred was listed as a survivor of Duaine, but he wasn't. He was already more than two years gone, and no one knew.

This kind of casual grasp of relation shows up again and again in our family. We know names, but we don't know each other, or we know different stories. When Dad's mother, Della, died in 1978, I felt nothing. I didn't know her. Dad didn't love her, except, perhaps, for the way any boy wants to love his mother, even when she shuts him out. I've learned enough about Della to know that she didn't mitigate Dick Mader's violence toward those kids, and in some cases she even abetted it. Hardship and pain bind some people; in the case of Dad and his siblings, they simply ran away from each other and toward their own destinies once they got the chance. Sentimentality wasn't a luxury they could afford.

But then I talk to my newfound cousin Shelly on the phone, and she has warm memories of Dick and Della Mader and none of her own father.

She also tells me to keep her father's certificate from the president. It wouldn't mean anything to her, she says.

It's JUNE 26, 2015, and I'm in Spokane again, sitting at a table in Arend Hall on the Whitworth University campus. The woman I've found online, Debbie Henson, works here. She's the daughter of a woman named Roberta Bonnalie, who's six years dead. Roberta was Duaine's girlfriend at the end of his life.

I've talked to Debbie on the phone a couple of times, trying to explain who I am and why I've come calling about this man she knew when she was 12 years old. In person, she's friendly, if a bit nervous, same as I am.

I ask her if Roberta loved him, and if she thinks they'd have married had Duaine lived.

"I think so, yeah," she says.

I ask Debbie if Duaine was good to her and her older brother.

"He spoiled us," she says. "He bought us a pool table. It's still in my house."

She gives me a CD, her fulfillment of my request for pictures of Duaine and Roberta. I thank her, and after some more small talk, I leave. I'm due in Creston that afternoon, to see Duaine's place of rest one more time.

It will be late that night, hours away in Olympia, Washington, when I pop the CD into my laptop and see my uncle in a way I never have before—in full color; asleep; shirtless on a couch; opening presents with Roberta at Christmas. The moments are candid, revealing. They show a human being, not a concept.



Duaine with Roberta Bonnalie, the woman he was dating when he was killed.

In Duaine's face, though, I still see the little boy from the old photograph. I see my father. I see their sister. I see their mother.

I see everything I know about them, and I'm left with gratitude for that and frustration for the fact that so much still eludes me.

WE ALL WANT CONNECTION. It's a human desire. And in my case, with an aging father whose life has been so heartbreaking in so many ways, I feel a powerful compulsion to learn what I can while he's still here. So many people are already gone and have taken their stories with them that I can be frantic about preserving what's left. I try to delude myself sometimes into thinking that the effort is for him. But it is, at its heart, a selfish endeavor. I want stories that I can touch when I can no longer slip my arm across his shoulders.

I know that time is coming.

But it's more than mere desire for connection. I try to honor my father and his family because so little is known to me, and because the vagaries of chance are so strong with us. I'm a Lancaster not because I was born naturally into it. I was adopted at birth, placed with my parents because a scared University of Washington undergrad saw no way to keep me, because Ron Lancaster and Leslie Johnson happened to be at a party on the Billings Rimrocks on the same night, met, ran away together, married, were unable to conceive a child and, late in a marriage that wasn't very good, tried to mend their torn lives with a baby.

The Lancasters aren't my blood. But make no mistake: they are my people.



I ROLL INTO CRESTON AT MIDAFTERNOON, and at once I'm turned around. Part of this is circumstance, and part is intention. Nine months earlier, after a snap decision to come here in the throes of despair, I was pulled in from the west by my GPS application, and by chance I was deposited where I wanted to be. This time, I've come with purpose, direct from Spokane, and I'm turned around. I'm looking on the wrong side of town for the cemetery, and at last I have to stop in at the post office. I'm happy to see a friendly face on this bright day, and I'm eager to see Duaine's resting spot with a fresh perspective—on him, on my father, on my own life. The words "life goes on" are hackneyed; the actual going on is profound.

Once oriented and back at the cemetery, I take my girlfriend's hand, and we walk down the row toward Duaine. Even now, I can see it, the simple new marker with the concrete bunting.

I stand there and gaze down at the spot. I clench Elisa's hand ever tighter. I wish for inspired words, but they come out banal instead. "Well, Uncle Duaine, here you are." I look around. There's no more loneliness, no more heartache. It's a beautiful day, clear and hot, mountains hugging the horizon in the distance. If he must rest, this is a good spot.

Elisa and I walk back to the car, hand in hand. A working vacation awaits us in Olympia and Seattle and Portland. Several days later, we'll be in Madras, Oregon, and I'll see Fred Lancaster's grave for the second time in my life. The story I've been trying to unearth will have a little more heft now. There's still so much to discover, and I can hope for time enough to get to it.

But right now I also have my own living to do.