What if...?

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I've just finished reading a article (in yesterday's Washington Post) about a friend of a friend of mine, who was married in 1956 (as I was) to a young Naval officer (as I was). It was the Cold War era, a time when many of us married young military officers. I didn't know this woman, but I had heard her story from our mutual friend: that three months after her wedding, her husband's spy plane was shot down off the coast of China. His body was never recovered. A year later he was declared dead by the military. She returned to school, became a doctor eventually, married another doctor, and went on to have four children.

And then...thirteen years ago...she discovered that he may not have been killed, that there was a seemingly strong possiblity that he had been captured by the Chinese and held prisoner there.

She has not been able to cut through the red tape and evasions of either the American military or the Chinese government to find the truth, and so she will have to finish her days with that uncertainty.

It made me remember the days when I was a young military wife, living in military housing in San Diego, and I saw two officers in formal uniforms knock on the door of a nearby dwelling in order to notify the young woman there of her pilot husband's death.

And of course it brought back the memory of the official visit to my home - two officers; they always do this in pairs - to bring me the paperwork and the 200-page explanation of my own son's death in a fighter plane.

What if...? is always the jumping-off place for the imagination.

I remember asking my own mother - I was probably eight - "What if you hadn't married Daddy? What if you had married somebody else? Would I be me, or whould I be somebody else?" (I got an evasive reply.)

"What if my dad had not been killed? Where would we be living now?" my granddaughter muses.

And I'm happy to ponder that with her. "Well, he loved to ski. I bet he would have wanted to live near mountains."

"Yes, but what if..?" she replies.

And then we fall into the "fortunately, unfortunately" game she and I have played since she was four or five.

Fortunately he was a great skier.

Unfortunately his job required him to live in a desert.

Fortunately he perfected the art of skiing down sand dunes and he developed a ski resport in the desert.

Unfortunately everybody who went there got very sunburned and then they sued him.

Fortunately his brother is a good lawyer.

That's really the way fiction is put together. Things seem to be going smoothly and then: whammo. Suddenly they aren't. For the writer, at each juncture in the narrative, there is the what-if.

Many people over the years have been dissatisfied with the ambiguous ending of "the Giver." They don't like the process of creating it for themselves, using the what-ifs of their own imaginations. He lives? He dies? You choose.

The problem for the true story of the woman I read about today is also that there is no ending; just the various what-if's. But for her, not one of them a happy or comforting one.

Tags: Untagged