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Pauline Laurent. *Grief Denied: A Vietnam Widow's Story.* Santa Rosa, Cal: Catalyst For Change, 1999. 229 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9671424-0-1.

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THE WAR IS NEVER OVER

We don't see much of them, and when they arise as an image in the popular imagination it's often the beautiful, strong Jacqueline Kennedy standing there so bravely as her husband's flag-draped caisson passes by. Widows. So many of them, and so many left by wars.

Pauline Laurent married her college sweetheart, and he was dead nine months later, consumed by Vietnam. She was left seven months pregnant and with a pitifully short time as a wife. Even that was truncated; Howard's training requirements kept him on base most of the time, and when he was home he was so exhausted he could only sleep, wracked by horrors of his upcoming deployment to Vietnam. There was hardly enough time to make a life together.

Our culture doesn't honor death, and Vietnam was a national shame. War widows at any time get only a short time to grieve, and then they're expected to get a grip – get over it. The widows and families of the Vietnamese war often didn't even get that. Pauline's words tell the shame she felt, and how she internalized and lived that shame, and kept her awful pain shoved down, down, down, deeper and deeper; frozen in ice she didn't even recognize after awhile.

She raised her baby, Michelle, whose own agonizing loss of a father she never knew is just now beginning to be addressed, and she lived her life as best she could. It never quite came together though, no matter what or how hard she tried.

Vietnam is an entire context, with monumental social impact and disruption. Laurent is able to tell her story beautifully within that context, as she is a part of it herself. Raised in a distant, dysfunctional family with a cold and absent alcoholic father and a mother consumed by rage at her husband, she had little warmth and comfort to help her through her descent into darkness, although she did have a roof over her head and food in her parent's house to have her child and care for her in her earliest years.

In time, Laurent returned to school on the GI Bill and found herself in the midst of campus and unrest, with her fellow students condemning everything her husband had supposedly died for. The guilt and shame she already felt increased by quantum bounds.

In time she graduated and embarked on a series of jobs remarkable for the energy and sheer drive she put in to them. For a good many years she devoted her life totally to Werner Erhardt and his "est" movement; an amalgam of destructive philosophies and half-baked snippets of various psychological theories largely noteworthy for its effectiveness in getting people to part with large sums of money for "classes," as well as for its demands for total obedience to Erhardt's discipline for his staff. It was a long time before Laurent realized she was being severely abused, manipulated, and exploited. Only then did she gather the strength to leave.

She never had time to grieve. Even if she had, society said she should have gotten over that a long time ago. We don't do death here.

Pauline Laurent hit Clinical Depression; a life-threatening, devastating disease. Her description of it is so very, very true. That's what's so remarkable about this little book; Laurent's ability to tell what hell is, simply and with purity.

Then slowly, oh, so slowly, glimmers of faint, far-

away light began to show. She began some 12-Step programs and began to see and deal with her addictions, including the ones which made her want to punish herself, over and over. She began to think about the Box, that shabby cardboard box the Army sent back to her, still smelling of the damp and mold from the river where he'd died. For years she'd moved it from place to place, taped up and hidden. She asked for it back from Michelle, to whom she'd given it in an effort to be free of it.

She opened it and looked at his wallet, still containing the rotted scapular he'd gotten from his mother to keep him safe. She took out and looked at his uniform hat and the other few items left; all that remained of her husband she still loved with all the fervor of a breathless young college girl embarking on an exhilarating adventure. Her marriage hadn't lasted long enough for all of that to change, to steady.

Pieces of ice were crumbling, stabbing her soul. Twenty-six years after Howard died, she began to grieve. One day she hooked up with the Vietnam Veterans of America, and began to talk to the shattered, damaged veterans, who soon embraced her as one of their own. She attended picnics and meetings of organizations of widows, sons and daughters of dead soldiers, and began to speak everywhere she could get a hearing about her experiences of widowhood. Finally, she went to The Wall, and she and Michelle traced the letters of Howard's name, feeling his spiritual presence all around them and comforting them.

Veterans often speak of their dead buddies stopping them from suicide, or just speaking to them. They seldom tell outsiders of this, and who can blame them? Widows and children, too, often tell of such things, particularly within certain groups where such things are accepted, such as among tribal people. Howard's presence, and his words to Michelle on another occasion helped them move toward healing where grief had been too long denied.

This is a difficult book to read, but one which demonstrates with starkly beautiful and simple writing just what it means to lose love. The experience holds true whether the loss is a husband, a wife, a parent, a child; what is lost is the part of the soul which loves. Healing may be long in coming, or it may not come at all. For Pauline Laurent, and perhaps for Michelle, there is great hope that Howard's death will no longer destroy their lives. Howard would be a grandfather now, and that is hope.

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