

For as long as there have been playgrounds, there have been playground arguments. For as long as there have been playground arguments, there has been the phrase, “My dad can beat up your dad.” It’s an oddly specific relic of a bygone era, born in a culture where the family name carried weight and respect. A boy was not simply a boy. He was someone’s son, and by his words and actions, he could polish or tarnish the reputation of his father. The power of a last name slowly died when America urbanized, but this one-liner refuses to die alongside its origin. That said, the phrase has been supplanted in some places by a much more pointed attack; “My dad outranks your dad.”

On the playgrounds of Colin Powell Elementary, this variation was as natural as breathing or walking. Perhaps it speaks to the atypical structure and values of a military family, or perhaps it’s a weapon of convenience- proving rank is much simpler than proving martial prowess, and the process causes far less harm. I never heard the line directed at me; my father was a full colonel, and well on his way to receiving the first star. In retrospect, it may have been a consequence of my introversion more than anything. The kids who boasted about their parents’ ranks tended to be far too loud for my autistic ears.

While I can’t personally testify to this, anecdotes from old friends suggest that this unique derivative of the typical caste system in schools perfuses military towns in general. Friends are temporary in the military life, whisked away with little notice by new orders. With nothing else to go on, any new classmate- and there will be plenty- is promptly stratified according to their father’s rank, and in the absence of at least one military parent, relegated to the dustbin of our miniature society. “Being cool” can only get you so far. That said, there is a social

circle to which one can be unceremoniously admitted regardless of rank. It is a circle of equals, elevated but painfully isolated, and completely inescapable.

The mark which signifies membership typically hangs next to the American flag on the front porch. Without context, one would think it to be a potent warding sigil, diverting the uncomfortable gaze of neighbors regardless of their intentions. It may well be the only sign which has successfully deterred a door-to-door salesman. It is the black ribbon, usually plain but sometimes embroidered with a branch of service, and it signifies the home of men returning from deployments in zinc-lined boxes.

You can't help but stare at the ribbon. Be it sympathy, sorrow, or morbid curiosity, the black ribbon draws the eye for just long enough to remind its bearer that they are forever changed. Courtesy dictates you look away if noticed, but by then the damage has been done. I sometimes wonder if the loss of a spouse is less impactful than the loss of a typical life that comes with it. There's no way to act normal around a recent war widow.

A few children will put a black ribbon on their backpacks; most do not. Military communities gossip so extensively that any casualty will be public knowledge before the body hits the dirt. This information is typically kept from other children for a while under the guise of "giving the family some time and privacy," a noble but completely pointless gesture. The unexplained absence of a classmate is the first clue; the vague, noncommittal response of teachers when questioned is the second clue. The third and most telling clue is the poorly disguised grief on the teacher's face as they shoo you back to your seat.

As strange as this sounds, the hardest part for me as a kid was seeing the dogs. Nearly every house had a dog, and as far as I was concerned, the people who owned the dog were usually an afterthought. I knew most of my neighbors by their dogs. My favorite, a golden

retriever named Hobbes, was six doors to the left. I probably spent more time in their yard than I did in my own. Hobbes' owners were Corporal McKendrick and his teenage daughter Alice, names I only remember from how many times I asked them if Hobbes could come outside and play. Rusty the mastiff lived next door alongside a boy my age, a girl two or three years younger, a second lieutenant, and his wife. Try as I might, I can't recall their names, but I can still see Rusty lying in the driveway for hours on end each day after the black ribbon went up, waiting for his master to return. Rusty died lying beside the mailbox a few weeks before I moved; loyal to the end.

I still compulsively look for black ribbons when I walk around my new neighborhood. I've yet to see one, but the chance is always there. With my own father retiring a few years after his tour of Iraq and my only sibling medically ineligible for service, I know now that I'll never have to live under a black ribbon, but my formative years were earmarked by constant reminders of what my father was getting himself into. When you spend enough time living amongst the dead and the deformed souls they leave behind, you quickly condition yourself to keep an eye on every flagpole. The next ribbon might be closer than you expect.