Reflection on Kristen Iversen’s “Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats”

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Our world is full of many secrets, mysteries, lies, and conspiracies that often go unnoticed or are pushed to the side. Much like in Full Body Burden, many people choose to avoid speaking up about certain events or incidents that occur in their everyday lives. Whether it is a little white lie, a medical condition, or a life-threatening issue, some people would rather stay silent than speak up and defend or fight for an issue.

When first receiving this assignment I asked myself, “How in the world can I relate my life to someone who grew up next to a secret nuclear weapons plant?”

I tried to think of things to write about before reading the book. The first thing that came to my mind was a medical mystery that occurred in a town thirty minutes away from me named Leroy, or “The Town That Caught Tourette’s.” It all started when a large group of teenage girls began to experience tics and Tourette-like symptoms. There was speculation that the tics and twitches were caused from infections, conversion disorder, and Lyme disease, but the parents and the community were not buying into these theories.

The town demanded answers and there were even arguments with the school about why they would not do any water or soil testing.

Doctors kept telling the kids’ parents different possible theories as to what was causing the tics, when in reality they had no idea.

Parents were sick of the lies and the stories and just wanted the doctors to speak out and be honest. Another theory that was discovered later on in the investigation was about a chemical
spill that occurred in 1970 when a train derailed near the Leroy school. This theory reminded me of Rocky Flats, and of all the medical issues that the community faced later on in life.

After reading *Full Body Burden*, I wanted to connect to the book on a more personal level. The first thing that came to my mind was how similar my family was to Kristen’s. Just like her family, my mom and dad had three girls and then a boy.

As a child I can remember barely getting to see my dad because he was always working at his office as an insurance agent. When he was home, he was either too tired to do anything or he would be drinking, like Kristen’s dad. Just like Kristen’s mom, my mom knew when not to speak up about these certain issues. At the time, I was too young to understand any of this, but my sisters were aware of when to keep quiet and what not to say.

My mom had finally had enough and my parents divorced when I was in about second grade. The topic of their divorce has always been taboo in our family, and my sisters and I do not really talk about it.

After the divorce, my dad really turned his life around. He quit drinking, he focused on his family, and he focused on his relationship with God. However, medical issues caused by diabetes and alcoholism caught up with him. At one point my dad came home after being in the hospital for a few months and told us goodbye. He had a tumor the size of a tennis ball growing close to his heart. The doctors told him he had better tell his family goodbye and make arrangements with my mom.

This reminded me of when Kristen was told to say goodbye to her two sons when she had cancer. The feeling I felt that day was something I cannot describe. I was in the fourth grade and was going to have to be “the kid without a dad” for the rest of my school career. Miraculously, the tumor disappeared. Although the tumor disappeared, my dad faced medical issues until his death on September 2, 2009.

I understand what it is like to grow up in a large family, I understand how hard it is to deal with alcoholism in a family, I understand how hard it is to say goodbye, I understand how the loss of a loved one can change your whole world, and, most importantly, I understand how hard it is to speak up during crucial times. Although speaking up is never easy, in the end the impact it can have is worth the risk.

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