

'Search' for a dead man is a link to loss

ALZHEIMER'S disease was the first thing that came to mind when I saw the flier. Another of its victims must have wandered off, I thought. Anguished loved ones must be looking for him, posting copies of this flier on telephone poles and sliding them under windshield wipers in Northwest Baltimore.

That's how it looked to me, and you'd have thought the same.

Until you looked more closely.

There was something a little odd about this flier.

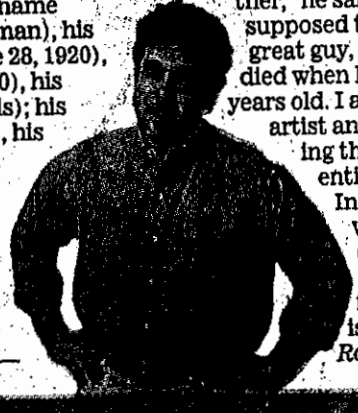
For one thing, "Lost" — and not "Missing" — appeared in bold letters across the top, above a photograph of a man in a T-shirt. The photo looked old, of another era, perhaps the 1940s or early 1950s. The man, who appeared relaxed and happy

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This Just In . . .

smoking a pipe, seemed too young to have Alzheimer's. The flier listed his name (Marvin Lee Goldman), his date of birth (June 28, 1920), his height (5 feet 10), his weight (168 pounds); his hair color (brown), his eye color (brown), his occupation (plumber), his place of birth (Baltimore), and the date of his death (Jan. 29, 1978).

That last part —



the date of death — stopped me.

How could anyone be looking for a dead man?

I sent an inquiry to the e-mail address listed on the flier. In a day or so, Jonathan Goldman, a young artist born in Baltimore, educated at Gilman and Princeton, now working on a graduate degree at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, messaged back.

"Marvin was my grandfather," he said. "He was supposed to be a great guy, but he died when I was four years old. I am an artist and I am doing this piece entitled 'Loss.'

In a very real way, I am conducting a 'search' for him. It is part [See Rodricks, 6B]

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Dan Rodricks

'Search' for dead grandfather touches emotional link to loss

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installation art and part performance art."

The "performance" part of the project took place over five days in November, around Thanksgiving, when Goldman posted his fliers in or near Charles Village, Druid Hill Park, Hamilton Park, Lake Ashburton and Pikesville, haunts of his late grandfather. The postings gave him a feeling of urgency — as if his grandfather were still alive, as if he still could be found.

Goldman left a flier on brick steps that lead to a vacant lot on Fairview Avenue, near Liberty Heights. Marvin Goldman had been a boy in a house there. Later, the house was ravaged by fire and razed. Jonathan Goldman did the same on Deancroft Road, where the man on the flier had raised his family. In posting the fliers that recalled his grandfather's life, Jonathan Goldman believes he recreated that life, in a way.

And the spaces marked with the flier became public monuments to Marvin Goldman.

That's how the grandson sees it. "I loved posting the fliers around the lake [Ashburton] where you walk," he told another e-mailer who inquired from Baltimore. "I posted them on the fence of the baseball diamond and on home plate. I imagined my grandfather, young, playing in that space."

He's not the first young man to indulge such imaginings.

He's not the first to launch such a search.

My paternal grandfather is nothing more to me than a severe-looking man in an ill-fitting suit, a sepia tone in an antique frame. I never knew him. Yet, many times over the years I've looked at the old photograph — actually stared at it for several minutes at a time — and wondered about him. I've imagined him in shirt sleeves work-

ing in a steel mill, or sipping wine under shade trees, or standing on the deck of a ship arriving in America, standing in front of a mirror and shaving with a straight razor. I've often wondered what my grandfather's voice was like, whether he was as severe as the photograph suggests, or whether he was a fun-loving man with a generous heart.

Today, my children look at the photograph and ask me questions about him, and there's little I can say.

He died before I could know him.

And I never really tried to learn about him. I was afraid to ask my father, his son. Likewise, my grandmother, his widow. I didn't want to bring up the sad subject of their loss.

My loss, too.

An inherited loss.

That loss of experience — the silent regret that lives in many of us — is what Jonathan Goldman tried to tap with his artistic experiment here.

As Goldman was posting the fliers in Hamilton Park last month, a man stopped him. In the chilly air of the Thanksgiving holiday, the two ended up in a discussion of families and how they become physically and emotionally scattered. The man said his family was originally from a farm in North Carolina. His sister still lives there. He sends her \$2,000 each year, so she won't lose the farm, and he won't lose the connection to his past.

That his art project could provoke such a discussion was an achievement for Goldman.

"For me, the most important part is the search for my grandfather," he says, "and that other people see their own searches."

Spoken like an artist — metaphysical, out there in the distant orbits of emotion and thought, but striking very close to home.