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Breathing Through the Night

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Breathing through the Night

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By
Amber Jensen

BA South Dakota State University, 2009

May 2012

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to my beautiful children, George and Addie, and to my husband, Blake, who knew he was marrying a writer, married me anyway, and has been a thoughtful critic, caring father, and understanding husband for the last seven years. I love you all.

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Memory Sky.....	1
My Soldier	14
Temporary Home	31
Letting Go	38
T-12.....	43
Baby Day	46
Funny War Story.....	50
Survival Strategy.....	52
Anesthesia.....	62
Breathing through the Night	68
Framing Our Family	77
Transitory Home	85
A New Way of Seeing	93
Silence.....	103
Getting Out.....	113
Reframing Our Family	117
Buoyancy	126
Disability.....	136
Stupid Kids.....	147
Tick Catcher.....	154
Playing House	164
The Shape of Memory	172
Vita.....	181

Abstract

In *Breathing through the Night*, the author examines the moments of understanding and misunderstanding, the moments of fear, coping, and relief that occur during her husband's deployment to Iraq and upon his return. The experiences of this military family serve as a magnifying lens through which the author explores means of coping and the role of communication in making meaning from memory, in shaping personal narratives within layers of story and history.

Memory Sky

“I *saw* him today,” I said.

I shifted in the passenger seat to face Blake, turning my back to a ditch of fresh green. Blake glanced at me from the driver’s seat, lifting his chin then looking back at the tar-veined hills of highway 25 as he waited for me to explain. He had been home from Iraq for almost two years, but every time I received this invitation to communicate—Blake lifting his eyebrows slightly, opening himself to my stories and concerns—I still felt grateful. That day I felt grateful, but a bit sheepish, too, because I wasn’t sure how Blake would receive my story, another story about the grandpa I never knew. The subject was significant to me, but I couldn’t help but think it held meaning for both of us, like it was part of *our* story somehow. I started into my explanation, hoping the words would shape meaning as they slipped from my mouth.

“Grandpa Dayton. Alive and smiling. Something I never thought I’d see.” I paused and looked to the clear, spring sky—the waves of light, split and scattered, made perceptible by dust particles and water droplets—still marveling at the new image of Grandpa that I’d acquired that day.

Dayton had always been a source of questions for me. I knew him from black and white photos and fragments of stories sprinkled here and there at holiday meals and afternoon coffee like powdered sugar over brownies. Blake knew Dayton from my versions of those stories, and yet he understood Grandpa in ways I could not. Once, noticing a small black and white photo tucked in a china closet, Blake said: “Dayton was a first sergeant? You never told me that.”

“I didn’t know,” I said.

“The patch on his uniform. First Sergeant. That really meant something, especially in those days.” In a glance, Blake had made sense of the photo I’d studied for years. He didn’t need to memorize the slope of Grandpa’s nose, the droop of his eyes, his faint smile lines like I did. It was simple to him, not emotional. He didn’t share my need to understand this man, but he was intrigued by the soldier’s story, so I knew I could tell him more.

“It was after you left the party today, when Martha showed Grandma her birthday present—a video their old neighbors found and put on DVD. She just told Grandma to watch the TV, and there he was. Grandpa Dayton. It was amazing.”

The car hummed, tires dragging over pavement. In the back, George slumped against the side of his car seat, sound asleep, so instead of naming the farm places as we went by—Grandpa Jensen’s, Cliff Corey’s, John T.’s—I let my eyes drift along with clouds, recreating Grandpa’s image: eyelashes fluttering, lips moving. “It wasn’t even black and white—he had color in his cheeks” I said. “He was standing there with Grandma and all the kids, just grinning.” I closed my eyes to examine the memory. It seemed like a dream.

“I just never thought I’d see him so . . . happy. I never imagined him that way, you know. All the stories about him came from Grandma Evie, and they were all sad, so I guess I just pictured him that way.” As I explained, I remembered the look on Grandma’s face when she saw Dayton. She’d been smiling and shaking her head at her great-grandkids, who toddled and giggled around her, when she glanced up to find the image of the husband she’d lost more than forty years before glowing on a flat screen TV. “When she saw him, she gasped, raised her fingers to her lips, and said, ‘*Oh Dayt.*’”

She’d whispered the words so quietly I couldn’t be sure I’d even heard them, but her expression was one I understood, one I’d imagined myself wearing. When Blake was in Iraq, I

worried that he might not come home and that someday his memory would catch me by surprise, leave me shaking my head in that sad, slow way, like I couldn't believe such a tragedy could become distant memory and then sneak up on me. I understood Grandma's response, but I wasn't sure if Blake did. I reached toward him, resting my hand on his thigh, my fingers circling his knee.

“Grandma used to say how hard it was when she married Baine. How she was Baine's first love, but she still loved Dayton, too. She never fell out of love with him, you know, he just died.” My voice trailed off as, for a moment, Blake and I, in our tan Impalla, were swallowed up by a shimmering shelterbelt of Cottonwood trees. I'd passed through that corridor of green thousands of times, a mile from the farm where I bottle-fed Holstein calves as a kid. The covering of trees was familiar and comforting, but that day, as Blake and I passed through its thick shade, it felt as though our story was merging with that of Grandpa Dayton and Grandma Evie. The past hovered like low clouds—floating mist thin enough to see through, but still visible, thick enough to be felt on the skin—and I experienced the weight of their steel grey tragedy, how when Blake was a soldier in Iraq, Grandma's story of loss had shadowed the possibility of my own.

“Grandma spent her life wishing Dayton weren't gone,” I said, “but loving Baine at the same time.” I slid my fingers over the back of Blake's hand and tucked them against his palm. “I'm just glad I didn't have to find out what it's like. Because while you were in Iraq, I guess I imagined the possibility.” I turned to the blur of green and blue outside my window, unable to face Blake as I confessed. “I was afraid, you know, that maybe you wouldn't come home.”

I didn't exhale until Blake spoke.

“I was, too,” he said. “I thought about it. But I guess I always believed if it happened—you know, if I didn’t make it home—we’d be like them. That if you had to, you’d move on, get remarried. But I pictured it like that. That I’d be your Dayton. That it would always be me.”

Dayton was just over twenty years old when he came home from war. In Japan, he had written home to his parents, dull lead pressed over thin paper in even cursive, outlining plans for protective shelterbelts, fields of corn and soybeans. Once at home, he met and married Evie, a twenty-seven year old nurse anesthetist, and they started a family—six kids in nine years. They treasured their children and felt blessed, but life was a struggle with a large family and income from only a few pigs and sheep, the milk of thirteen cows, the eggs laid by their barn full of chickens. But those struggles weren’t part of the stories Grandma told me. She talked about the fact that Dayton always believed he would die young.

She told the story so many times that it feels familiar now, plays in fuzzy grey tones in my mind, like an old eight millimeter movie: two young wives in belted dresses with full skirts; two husbands wearing suspenders and plaid; sweet clouds of pipe smoke; Dayton shuffling pinochle cards, silence punctuated by their crisp flip and snap.

“Life insurance? Seems like a waste. Why now?” asks a young man, a pipe dangling from his lip.

“Because a man needs to take care of his family,” Dayton replies. “Even if—especially if—something happens to him.” His slender fingers spin cards across smooth-finished maple.

I envision Evie fluttering from the kitchen, where flower-etched glasses clank in a stainless steel sink. She laughs, skirt lifting as she spins toward him. Flannel crackles under the friction of skin as she slides hands over shoulders, crosses them in front of his chest, and says “Oh Dayt, you’re not going to die.”

In the timeline of Grandma’s stories, only a few weeks passed before Dayton made a trip to town. Piecing together shards of stories, mining details from photos I’ve seen and newspaper clippings I’ve read, I imagine that he emerged from the bedroom, having changed from worn denim overalls to fresh jeans. Just a few errands, he said. He’d be home soon. His sharp elbows jutted out from below crisp, rolled, cotton sleeves. His boots plodded down the hallway, past the kitchen to the front door of the farmhouse, and his narrow wrist flipped in a casual wave. Evie turned from a sink full of dishes, a boiling pot of potatoes, or a crying child to look over the half wall of the kitchen as he passed. She considered offering coffee, but it was too soon after lunch, so she lifted her chin with a warm, see-you-soon smile. And then he disappeared out the door, into his black Ford, and down the road.

According to Grandma, when Dayton neared the train tracks a half mile south of the house, he remembered the previous day, when the calves got out and into the neighbors’ corn. Grandma has always been sure of this detail. She knew Dayton, his tendency to worry, the care he took with his farm. He glanced to the fence line, thick with crab and snake grasses and fat-stemmed weeds, and he shielded his eyes from mid-day sun. He squinted, searching for a thin line of barbed wire against overgrown green. When the train emerged from the grove of trees along the track, he was thirty feet away. He hit the brakes.

That night, when Grandma Evie learned of the accident, Dayton was already dead.

Years after the accident, Grandma wrote about Dayton's death, how when she saw his body in the morgue at the hospital where she used to work, she thought he could have been sleeping. His forehead was bruised, nothing more. She told herself he couldn't wrap his arms around her but she could wrap hers around him; she slipped her hand behind Dayton's head as the coroner gasped. Her husband was cold and stiff. She laid him back against steel, felt blood streak across the back of her hand.

Later, when she read his death certificate, listing "obstruction of airway" as cause of death, Evie would say, "I could have saved him. I'm a nurse. I was only a half mile away. I could have cleared his airway." And she would state this possibility over and over again—to her friends, children, and grandchildren—as if repeating it might make the wish a reality.

"If only they had called . . ." she would say, her voice hollow, eyes vacant and tired. She nodded a faint no. "He was only going to be gone a few minutes . . . I was busy with one of the kids, with something . . . *Why* didn't I go to him? *Why* didn't I kiss him goodbye?"

She repeated these stories to me many times, but I misunderstood for years, thinking that what she regretted was not telling Dayton she loved him one last time. I was young and had probably seen too many romantic movies. But eventually, when I came to know the threat of dying young, when my husband was at war, Grandma's stories became part of my own, and I realized that she wanted more than a goodbye. If she had stopped him, said goodbye, the train would have passed. If she had just given him a kiss, he wouldn't have died.

She wanted to save him, change fate, prove Dayton wrong. She wanted to be the something that kept him alive.

* * *

I thought I had seen Grandpa once before.

It was the summer after my sophomore year of college, after Blake's three months at basic training and AIT. It was the first summer that Blake and I spent isolating ourselves in the corner of the dugout after baseball games, accidentally brushing our arms against each other as we drank beer and talked quietly about books like *The Things They Carried*, *Catch 22*, and *Closing Time*. I thought we were going somewhere. Making some progress. Becoming something. And I thought a night at the movie theater, seeing *Saving Private Ryan*, would be the perfect way for Blake and I to connect at home, face to face, like we had in the letters we sent to each other during his army training. Those letters had made it seem like Blake was my soldier and I was his something to come home to.

But Blake didn't come to the movie, and by the time my friends and I made our way inside, the movie had already started. The handheld cinematography of the opening sequence dizzied me, and when I fell into a fraying red seat, I landed in a nauseating war scene: the stuttering staccato of gun fire, a chorus of screams, soldiers collapsing mid stride, limbs blown from bodies. As the movie progressed, the story of three brothers dead, one still alive and serving somewhere in Normandy, kept me thinking about my soldier and his two brothers who also served in the military.

Half way through the film I watched Tom Hanks as Captain Miller, standing among dusty ruins with a German POW trembling and mumbling at his feet. Hanks wanted to let the man go. His soldiers resisted. So he explained his fear, that every man he killed made him feel further away from home, that maybe he would be a stranger to his family when he returned from

war. As I watched, the one-dimensional character and his words leapt from the screen and morphed into my memory. His face faded to black and white. His dusty fatigues stiffened into a crisp dress uniform. His eyes darkened, his nose sharpened, his shoulders turned slightly, and I found myself studying the black and white photo of a soldier—the one my mother framed and displayed in her china cabinet. I remembered Grandma Evie’s words—“Dayt was afraid he wouldn’t know how to be a father after the things he had seen and done in war.”—but I heard them in first person coming from the mouth of the young man in the photo, the image on the screen, transformed.

“I don’t know if I can be a father after what I’ve seen and done at war.”

I closed my eyes to examine my memory of the photo, remembered Dayton’s face, the pulling back of his cheeks into something short of a smile, and I interpreted the expression in a new way, as something like regret. I’d heard my grandfather’s voice for the first time, I’d seen him come alive, and for the moment, I felt satisfied. As if I understood.

Blake had been in Iraq for less than two months when a muffled trill from deep inside my black, knock-off Prada purse interrupted my shopping trip. I dug into the purse and found my phone, which flashed “0 - unknown.” As I flipped my hair back, making room for the phone against my cheek, I leaned into my shopping cart and pictured Blake in digital camo, leaning into the frame of a payphone. I grinned, anticipating the deep scratch of his voice, and answered with an intimate, lilted, “Hi.”

He must have responded because I heard myself asking the usual, “How are you?” But then he hesitated, exhaling into the phone. I drew the heavy pause into my lungs and panicked as my voice echoed back to me. Finally Blake spoke, his words giving the moment sudden significance.

“I’m okay,” he said, “but something’s happened, some guys were hurt.”

Unable to comprehend the full meaning of his words, I absorbed insignificant details, instead. Steel beams glaring with a fluorescent-white glow. Blue honeycomb cart blurring before me. A bright waterfall of women’s clothes. Towels of blue, green, burgundy, and gold, folded neatly, stacked in fours. I choked on dust particles suspended in the air as I tried to find words to say, something appropriate to feel.

“I’m so sorry, Blake. Are you . . . ?”

I couldn’t finish the question. Of course he wasn’t.

He answered anyway. “I wasn’t there, on that mission, I’m okay.”

I stood, stunned, unable to recognize his voice, to imagine his face. My thumb scratched the leather seam of my cell phone case.

Finally Blake broke the silence. “I just wanted to call before you heard it somewhere else. I wanted you to know I was okay.”

“Of course, yeah, . . . Blake, I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.”

“I know. There really isn’t anything to say.”

George must have been snuggled in the navy and gold plaid of his car seat right there in front of me as I searched for something to say to the father he hadn’t met yet, but I can’t picture him there. I can only remember my hollow throat, the feeling of having no words. And I remember thinking of Grandpa Dayton, how he worried about becoming a father after having

experienced war. I wondered if Blake would feel the same way. This wondering was a conscious decision, and effort made to quiet the scream of a larger fear: what if Blake never got the chance to worry? What if Blake never came home? My eyes followed dingy floor tiles, hoping they would lead me somewhere—backwards in time, maybe, to a dugout on a summer night, where I could lean into Blake’s warmth, hear the echo of his laugh, or maybe forward to an airport embrace, to a moment when I could feel Blake’s arms locked behind my back, his breath on my neck. Instead, my eyes crossed, blurring the grid of grout lines into a fuzzy, floating checkerboard. Eventually, Blake said, “Well, I really need to get off the phone. Other guys need to call home.”

I’m sure we said goodbye, but all I remember is numbness, then a slow return to life. I studied the surface of my phone. I breathed and then blinked as I lifted my eyes. My features felt bloated and heavy as they do after a deep sleep sometimes. My nose blurred my line of vision, lips felt fat and numb. My chin seemed to spill down over my neck, fingers anchored me to the floor. I moved mechanically—lifting, reaching, lowering—abandoning a package of onesies I had planned to buy for George. Then I started to walk, letting the worn wheels of the cart pull me through aisles.

When I made it home somehow, I lifted George from his car seat and paced the living room with him snuggled in my arms. *What if that was our last conversation? “I’m sorry” was all I could say. What if he comes home and that’s still all I have to say?* The questions echoed like voices from the hallway, like memories of someone else’s life. I thought of Grandma and her regrets. *What if I never talk to him again? What if this is the conversation I spend the rest of my life reliving?*

* * *

I drove down a corridor of snow covered corn fields with Grandma Evie, wondering if she'd forgotten Grandpa Dayton. It seemed she hadn't spoken of him in years, but after Blake's going to and returning from war, our stories had criss-crossed somehow, and I needed those stories, as if they might help me make sense of my own. Grandma fidgeted beside me, sliding the fingers of one blue-streaked hand over the thin, waxy skin of the other. She looked out the window, pressed her lips together, and sighed. I wanted to ask about Dayton but knew I shouldn't. We were on our way to the hospital to see Baine—Grandma's second husband, the Grandpa who gave me whisker burns when I was young. He was the only Grandpa I'd known, so it seemed awful to be wondering about Dayton while Baine suffered in the hospital, but I was.

Threads dangled from incomplete vines and blossoms that swirled over Grandma's black cotton dress, unraveling like her mind. But she seemed alert that day, her eyes narrow and focused, not wide and darting with confusion like they did sometimes. So I told myself maybe she would remember. I hoped that crossing the train tracks would trigger a memory and a story, but she didn't notice the snow-covered tracks. So finally I asked, "Grandma, how did you meet Grandpa Dayton?"

She looked down at her lap and said, "You know, I guess I don't remember." She fell silent.

I gave her time to think as wheels buzzed over the highway and spun by green mile-marker signs. After straightening her bracelets, she lifted her left hand and tucked her thumb under to spin her gold wedding band, twisting, until the diamond stood at center. Studying the

square-set gem, she said, “It’s awful, all the things you wish you could remember, wish you could understand, but you just can’t.”

I had turned back to the ribbon of road ahead, feeling bad for mentioning a difficult subject, when I realized I had only seen one wedding ring on Grandma’s hand.

As a child, I loved to sit on Grandma’s lap and trace the delicate, two-toned leaves of Black Hills Gold, slide my fingertips over the smooth shimmer of herringbone, and imagine the sharp edges of cut stones. One by one I pointed to the nine gemstones of her mothers’ ring—ruby, amethyst, peridot, aquamarine—as she recited the names and birthdates of each of her kids. And I always asked Grandma why she wore two diamond rings. I knew the answer, but I liked to hear her say, “Because even after I married your Grandpa Baine I never stopped loving Dayton. He was my first love. Your mom’s daddy.”

She must be wearing both of them, I told myself. She always does. Then I reasoned, *Maybe she has to let go of the memory her first husband while she clings to the life of the second.* One ring. One husband. One memory. I glanced from the road to her lap every few seconds, trying to catch another glimpse, to verify the absence of the second ring, but she had curled her thin-skinned hands together. When Grandma lifted her head, piled with white curls showing a hint of gray, and stared silently out the window, I reprimanded myself. *No more questions. Let her rest.*

Then I heard her voice again, this time amazed, like a child. “Look at those clouds, so big and white against such a perfect blue sky. I wonder if I’ve ever seen any so beautiful in my life.”

“I have,” I said, bringing the car to a stop at a red light on the edge of town, “on my wedding day. We took pictures outside. In the background are the same puffy white clouds, the same blue sky.”

While I waited for the light to turn, I let my eyes and words wander, follow billowing white across an otherwise clear sky. “But I remember those clouds from another day, too . . . the day I took Blake to Sioux Falls . . . when he left for Iraq.”

I paused, thinking that Grandma probably didn’t even know who I was talking about. Her memory had started to fade before Blake and I married, so I wasn’t sure she even knew his name. Still, I continued. “That day when I hugged Blake goodbye, this is what I saw over his shoulder, this beautiful blue and white. It’s silly I’d remember that . . . I don’t know why . . .”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Grandma lower her head. She was studying her wedding ring again. She spun it around her finger and said, “Those were hard days. That’s why we remember them. Why we can’t forget.”

My Soldier: Pre-deployment

Blake and I had eaten our supper and settled in on rough upholstery in the living room. Blake sat up, attending to reruns of Family Guy, Futurama, or King of the Hill, while I nestled against the worn denim and soapy scent of his favorite Silvertabs. His fingers followed the curve of hair along my temple, and his body shook with the laughter he tried to hold silent so that I could rest. I was exhausted, in the early stages of pregnancy, so while the ground outside lay frozen beneath thick snow, I allowed Blake's warmth and his hollow laugh, muffled by flesh and fabric, to slow me into asleep.

But then something wrenched me awake: the smell of sienna powder; the sight of it dusted over apple slices sparkling with sugar in my mind; the soft flesh of caramelized fruit buried beneath crisp brown-sugar-and-oatmeal earth; the taste of it all blending, bleeding syrupy, cinnamon sweet. The craving had hit, and suddenly I felt myself springing from the couch, frantic for fulfillment.

I moved with such urgency that Blake stood and followed instinctively, his long stride matching mine until he paused at the edge of the kitchen counter, pulled back and paused to watch me lunge at the fridge and claw open the fruit drawer. I turned to explain, "I've got to have apple crisp." I watched his wide-eyed look of panic transform into a confused, eye-pinching face as I asked, "do you want some?"

"Apple crisp?" His voice softened into a near laugh, his head bobbed side to side as he continued in disbelief, "Apple crisp? No, no thanks."

He left the kitchen and fell back onto the couch, legs stretched over cushions, arms tucked in at his sides, while I frantically peeled red-streaked yellow skins with a flimsy paring

knife, filling a bowl of salt water with yellow-white apple moons. I checked the recipe scribbled in the back cover of a family cookbook, then pulled a chair to the stove front and stepped up to scour for ingredients inside the white, pressed-board cupboards.

“You’ve got to be kidding—no cinnamon?!” My disbelief jerked Blake back to the kitchen, where I dug through cookbooks, bags of flour and sugar, and plastic shakers of seasonings and spices in the baking cupboard. His wide eyes anticipated an emergency as he asked, “What’s wrong? What do you need?”

“Cinnamon. I’m completely out. Can you believe it?”

He smiled, lowering his brow as if reasoning with a child. “You mean you can’t make apple crisp without it?”

I turned, hands still hanging on the edge of the cupboard as I stared down at him thinking, *Sure I could . . . if cinnamon wasn’t the entire reason for wanting the dessert.* But before I could explain the urgency of pregnancy cravings, Blake was at the door, lacing his hunting boots. I moved to the frosty sliding glass doors that led to the deck and watched freshly falling snow fill the dotted-line his heavy boots left behind as he made his way across a white-frosted parking lot to the convenience store to see if they sold cinnamon.

Watching him leave, I wanted to cry, because even though Blake and I had grown up in the same small town and had attended the same church and school all our lives, even though we’d said many goodbyes and spent months and years separated by state and country lines, watching him go—even across the parking lot—reminded me that he would be leaving again soon. Sometime after the wedding we’d scheduled for Memorial Day weekend 2005, probably before our baby’s October due date, Blake would be going to Iraq.

On New Year's Eve of 1998, Blake and I walked together across a snowy circular driveway, making our way from the party to his dad's dusty pickup, where we could speak softly, let our words linger like the smell of cigarettes in the worn upholstery. The tight space of the truck cab was familiar for us. We'd spent many weekend nights there, driving around with his older brother, Brock, a case of Old Mil light, and piles of our favorite CDs. That night we were alone.

Blake and I were rarely alone together. We spent time with friends, drinking in the dugout after summer baseball games, sometimes skinny-dipping in the pool in the middle of the night, or watching TV in his grandparents' dairy where we slouched on rusty folding chairs surrounded by animal pelts and camouflaged jackets. I'd had a crush on Blake since junior high, when I watched his 7th grade basketball team play while I waited in my short blue and gold pleated skirt to cheer for the 9th grade game, so I wasn't surprised by the way Blake and I tended to drift away from parties and into our own intimate conversations. I was surprised, though, that our friends noticed so quickly and began to ask, "What's going on between the two of you?" I didn't have an answer, yet.

In the truck, I leaned across a console filled with gum wrappers and change, a shotgun angled against it. My thin fingers dangled from the faux-leather console, fluttered just above Blake's knee as he asked me about the literature classes I was taking in college. "Did you know rye was one of the staple foods in Salem and other places where people went on witch hunts? Some scholars think that the 'bewitched' women were really just high on fermented rye." Blake was always up for a discussion or a debate, so he egged me on and challenged my newly

acquired ideas. “Or maybe they were really witches that just happened to eat rye.” I loved the way his eyebrows peaked playfully as he questioned me, but I had questions for him, too.

“So, what about you? How come you aren’t going to school this year?” I asked.

“I’m joining the Guard,” he said. “Starting basic training next week and then going right into AIT.”

The answer surprised me, even though it shouldn’t have. Brock was in the National Guard, Blake had mentioned the possibility before, and their younger brother, Brad, was planning to join up after he finished high school. I squinted at Blake through the dark and asked, “You’re sure you want to do that?”

“Yeah, I am sure,” he answered.

“I don’t know much about the military,” I admitted, trying to look into his downturned eyes, “and I’m not saying it’s a bad idea, it just seems like a big deal. A big commitment. What makes you so sure?”

“Because I have no idea what I want to do or what I want to be,” he said, tracing the side seam of his Levi’s with his thumb. Then he looked up, but not at me. He looked through the windshield that reflected the glow of a yard light and said, “I’ve always known I would join the Army. I know I can be good at this.”

All I could imagine of military service was camouflage uniforms and weapons. I’d never handled any kind of gun, except for the time my uncle took my cousins and me out to the slough by Grandma Evie’s house and showed us how to fire a pistol. But in the dairy on a summer night I’d watched Blake meticulously piece a rifle back together after cleaning metal pieces I had no name for. I knew he was comfortable with guns. “So you aren’t going to go to college?”

“No, I’ll go to college,” he said, “just not until fall. It’s just that I’ve always known I wanted to do this.” He looked down again, and we sipped our beer in silence for a while. My breath hung, visible in the January cold, as I wondered what to say next. After so many nights, so many conversations, and Blake still at a safe emotional and physical distance, it seemed significant that he was sharing these plans with me. But I remembered my cousin’s wedding reception six months earlier, how Blake placed his hands over the royal blue lace of my bridesmaid’s gown but held his forearms stiffly between us while the chords of “Desperado” carried us from side to side, how he pulled me towards him for an unexpected, rigid hug during the final note and whispered, “You look beautiful,” and then disappeared for the rest of the night. I didn’t want to scare him off. So I held words and breath in my chest until Blake surprised me with an audible exhale and the words, “It would be nice to have someone to write to while I’m gone.”

The first letter with a return address of Fort Sill, Oklahoma, arrived two weeks later. Back at South Dakota State University for spring semester, back in the four bedroom apartment I shared with four girls from our hometown, I tore the letter open in the kitchen and I read my way down the hall to my corner bedroom. The letter was short, one small sheet of unlined Army stationery. Blake was fine. Basic Training wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be, but he wanted me to have his address in case I had time to write.

I had time. I wrote a letter immediately and went out to buy stamps the next day. I posted the letter and began to check the mail daily, looking for another envelope from Fort Sill.

I'd told myself I couldn't write until Blake responded, but after a week had passed, I decided one letter wouldn't hurt. *Just keep it short. Casual*, I told myself.

When Blake's second letter finally came, he apologized for being too busy to write and told me how much he enjoyed hearing from me. That was the only invitation I needed. I began to write whenever I had time or had a story I thought would interest him. I wrote about *Trainspotting* and *A Clockwork Orange* because I knew he would have seen the movies and might consider reading the novels himself. I tore Far Side jokes from my desk calendar if I thought they'd make Blake laugh and folded them between the pages of my letters. It didn't bother me that Blake only wrote once in a while. I read and re-read his letters and postcards, hearing his voice in my head as I followed the crooked lines of choppy cursive.

He wrote, "Amber, I know I promised you a letter, but this is a big postcard." It was true, he had promised a letter, but it *was* a big postcard, with a 5x7 picture of illumination flares going off at night on the front. I laughed when, after a couple sentences about the weather and the frustrations of down time on an Army base, Blake wrote, "I know this is pretty crappy, but I've already put a stamp on it and have written some, and I don't think I'll have time to write another." I'm sure my smile softened and my fingers curled over my collarbone as I read on:

"I thought a lot about home today and for the first time I was homesick.

I forgot to lock my locker and caught it before I left when I needed to get my gloves. I said to myself, 'Blake, what are you doing?' It made me feel good because it's all last names here and that is what I used to say to myself at home. So, you can imagine how nice your letter was."

I flipped the postcard over in my hand, savoring the last sentence. I studied the postcard's orange flares, the quote appearing beneath them in small caps. "A coward dies a hundred deaths, a brave man only once; but once is enough." I knew Blake would have noticed the quote, because he always noticed everything, always planned his words and actions carefully. I wondered if he imagined himself a coward, if his letters were an attempt at bravery. I thought of "Desperado." Blake had always insisted we end a night of beer drinking with that song. He always sang every word, hit every slide from note to note. His letters and postcards seemed like an attempt at following the song's instruction—at opening the gate and letting me in.

I trusted that interpretation more after another postcard came. Blake wrote that he was preparing for a 21 task test, but that he wasn't worried because "the Army is set up for the stupidest man alive." Then he added, "Speaking of witch,"—and yes, he did confuse the homonyms—"are you seeing anyone from class or anything?"

With hundreds of miles and three states between us, Blake's letters slowed my breathing, drew my eyes shut so that I could feel his presence. I fell asleep at night with a pen in hand, a notebook at my side, and the uneven black strokes of Blake's cursive, the worn pages of the letters I read and re-read daily, pressed between my pillow and cheek. In my dreams, Blake and I were like World War II couples I'd seen on TV or in media images—white-capped soldiers kissing young wives in fur-collared coats on the pier. A couple drawn together by military service. And that's when I cast myself in the role of his something-to-come-home-to.

By the 4th of July, I was the one coming home to Blake. That summer, I had crossed my first international border, traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico for a month-long study-abroad trip. In Mexico, I felt my world expanding suddenly as I learned to communicate with street vendors and the bouncers and waiters who worked at the disco my friends and I visited on weekends. By the time I returned to South Dakota, I'd changed my class schedule for the coming semester, having decided to double major in Spanish and English. But I'd also spent hours in Oaxaca scouring souvenir shops for gifts for Blake and Brock.

I returned home just in time for the 4th of July street dance, where I presented Bock with his volcano-topped ashtray that funneled smoke from stubbed out cigarettes through the top of the snow-tipped mountain, and Blake with his bottle of orange flavored Mezcal. Blake and I spent the night sneaking to my car to drink shots of the stinging alcohol. By 4 am, he had drunk the worm, and the two of us had found our way to the baseball field, where we stood under a cottonwood at the entrance to the park.

Blake laughed nervously as I wrapped my arms around his waist, then he squeezed my bony hips with his thin fingers.

“So, what is this?” I asked. “What’s going on here?”

Blake pulled me in towards him and we hugged like awkward kids at a junior high dance. “I don’t know. Nothing, I guess. Or something. It’s just that you’re *Amber*, you know.”

I didn’t know, I told him.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, putting distance between our bodies as he looked me in the eye and explained. “You’re Win’s daughter. Betty’s granddaughter. You’re smart and beautiful, and you’ve done so much more than I have. You’ve been to Mexico, learned

another language. And I just don't think I can do this. I can't ask you out, because I'm afraid I'll fu..." He censored himself. "I know myself. I'll mess it up."

I was flattered, but as Blake explained how he held me up on a pedestal, I shook my head no. "What do you mean I've done more than you have? You're in the Army—because you *believe* in it. Not because you want your college paid for, but because you believe you can do some good. You put off going to college for that. Don't you think that's something?"

He shrugged while I continued to shake my head. "And anyway, you'll fuck it up by not trying, too." I laced my fingers in his and pulled his hands together at the small of my back. "You have to try. We have to. Because I can't stand it anymore. I need to know what this is."

Finally, with a closed mouth kiss, he agreed.

Seven months later, I leaned against a payphone outside a bar in Guadalajara, waiting for Blake to say that he missed me or that he couldn't wait until I came home. I was back in Mexico, studying abroad again, and Blake was living in a trailer house that he shared with Brock while they both attended SDSU.

"I didn't expect to hear from *you*," he said. "So, how's Mexico?"

"It's good," I answered. "We finally figured out the bus route from our dorm to the *Centro de Estudios para Extranjeros*." I let the Spanish words roll off my tongue, thinking he might be impressed, then added with a laugh, "We only got lost twice, but once was when the bus driver stopped on this run-down street—I'm serious, it looked like the houses were falling

down—and he kicked us off. So I had to ask some people on the street and could barely understand anything they said, but eventually we figured out how to get back.”

Blake laughed, but then instead of questions or stories of his own, I heard the hum of the payphone. “So what about you?” I asked. “What are you up to? How’s school?” Blake answered quickly, “Not much. Pretty good, I guess.” The hum of the phone again. I pictured Blake’s lanky body spread over the length of his worn, tan couch, his hand dangling just above the floor as he tapped the TV remote against thin carpet. “You must be tired, ready for bed,” I said. “If you want, I can just email you later.” His response: “Well, you know, I don’t really check my mail.”

Before my one hundred peso phone card expired, before three beeps warned me that my ten minutes were almost gone, I said goodbye and headed upstairs to the bar, where my classmates sat, discussing their own relationship frustrations—cheating boyfriends and girlfriends back home. I had my own frustrations. “Blake sounds so happy to hear my voice when I call, and if I drive out to his trailer house, we spend hours talking and watching TV, but he won’t pick up the damn phone and call or get off the couch to visit me.” When my friends chimed in, saying Blake sounded like an ass hole, I softened my complaint. “No, I mean, Blake is just the best guy. Even though he’d never call me while I’m here, never send me an email, he’d never go out with another girl, either. He’d never even think of it. He thinks out everything he does, every single things he says, so much that I *know* what he says is true. He just never lies. But he drives me crazy.”

My friends’ advice came out something like this: “Fuck it. Who knows what’s wrong with him. There *is* something wrong with him, though. And you can’t wait around forever.” I didn’t believe them, exactly. I knew there was nothing wrong with Blake. But I was tired of

waiting, too. So when I returned to South Dakota, it was only for a couple months while I searched the internet for jobs teaching English as a Second Language in Mexico.

Three years later, I sat on the tile floor of my Guadalajara apartment, coiling a phone cord around my finger as I waited for the news that something was wrong with Grandma or someone else in the family. My dad had called me, which he never did. I knew it was something important. Finally dad's slow voice rumbled, "Well, I read in the paper that Blake's unit is being deployed. Him and Brad—they're both going to Iraq."

The sound of blood rushing through veins echoing in my ears as my heart sped ahead of my thoughts. I pictured Blake's wide grin, his uneven penmanship on the back of postcards, the childish picture of a deer and evergreens he'd sketched to fill up one page of stationary. I remembered his profile against a frosted truck window, the glance of his eyes towards me as he said, "It would be nice to have someone to write to while I'm gone." *I was supposed to be there when this happened. I was supposed to give him something to come home to.*

I felt suddenly out of place in Mexico—after three years of building a career, after establishing a relationship with Ernesto and moving to Guadalajara to live closer to him, after traveling to South Dakota twice each year, wondering what would happen when I saw Blake, and then returning to my life abroad more convinced than ever that Blake and I were just friends. After feeling I'd moved on, after thinking I'd forgotten, all it took was the thought of Blake going to war to make me want to transplant myself back to South Dakota, back to my old life, back to the old me.

At the very least, I knew I needed to talk to him.

I glossed over the facts when I explained to Ernesto. “We’ve been friends forever, and I just need to talk to him before he leaves. Make sure he’s all right.” Ernesto agreed. But I waited to dial the number. I couldn’t have Ernesto around when I made the call.

Mark answered, sounding surprised that someone wanted to talk to his son. “Blake?” he asked. “Yeah, he’s here.” He didn’t recognize my voice, but didn’t ask who was calling, either. I listened to heavy footsteps, silence, then footsteps again. I pictured Blake, shoulders slouched, his long arms dangling at his sides as he made his way to the kitchen, probably expecting a telemarketer. When he heard my hello, his deep voice lifted, “Amber? What are you doing? I didn’t expect to hear from you.”

“Well, my dad called, told me about you going to Iraq.”

“Oh, yeah,” Blake said. “We head to Fort Sill in a couple of weeks.”

“Wow, Blake. I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” he said. I could hear that he was still smiling. “This is what I’m supposed to do. This is why I joined the Army. You shouldn’t worry about it at all.”

It was an awkward but reassuring conversation. Maybe I’d forgotten who Blake was, why he joined the military—not for college tuition, but for service—or maybe I just still didn’t get it, didn’t understand. But hearing him, so confident, so willing to change the subject and find out what I was up to in Mexico, convinced me that he really did know what he was getting himself into and that he really did believe in what he was doing. He sounded fine, like he didn’t really need me, but still I felt guilty for not being there.

“Okay, well, good luck.” It seemed like the wrong thing to say. “Take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, you, too,” Blake said. “And, hey, thanks for calling. Really.”

When I moved home on Memorial Day weekend of 2004, I didn't think the return had anything to do with Blake. I was still convinced that I'd moved on, that the story of Blake and I was written in the past tense.

During my first week home, I wandered the streets of Bryant, savoring the small-town silence after four years of Mexico's noisy streets. By Wednesday, I was bored. I knew that there must have been an amateur baseball game that night--there were always baseball games on Wednesday nights--so I planned to walk by the field to see if anyone I knew was around. It was dark. The game would be over, but the players would still be there, scattered around the dugout and on coolers scattered along the third base line.

I was two blocks away when I heard Blake laugh. It was a drunken laugh, a series of loud staccatos that stopped me in the middle of the street. My pulse quickened, and I froze. I knew that if I didn't turn around, didn't walk back to my parents' house on Main Street, I'd be walking towards Blake.

I moved slowly, rolling the soles of my tennis shoes over gravel and still listening for Blake. As I neared the field, I couldn't distinguish his voice from the echoing cacophony and started to wonder whether or not he was still there. When I stepped into the dugout, gravel slipped beneath my feet, and several players turned toward the sound. Only Blake responded, jumping up from the worn, green bench. "Amber? What are you doing here? I didn't know you were home." He rushed towards me.

"Yeah, I'm home. Just moved back this weekend," I explained.

He hugged me suddenly, firmly, leaving his arms around my waist as he pulled back and asked, “For good? You mean you’re staying?”

As I stuttered the beginning of an answer, a red-headed kid lifted his baseball cap, scratching his head and walking towards us as he said, “Jensen, who’s the girl? You act like she’s the love of your life or something.”

“It’s Amber,” Blake said, smiling, still looking me in the eye. “I can’t believe you’re here. We beat Castlewood tonight—and we never beat Castlewood—and now you’re here. What are the odds?”

Blake turned, one hand cupping my elbow, the other reaching into a cooler beside him. He shook droplets of water off a silver can and led me to a bench in the dugout where we assumed our familiar positions—turned towards each other, my shoulder angled into him, my head tilted down so that I peered up at him as I talked. We returned to our comfortable conversations—familiar baseball and hunting stories that I’d heard twenty times before—and our habit of retreating from the rest of the crowd as the night went on. Soon Blake was confessing to me how he had spent the last several years figuring himself out.

“I used to get so worried about stuff, sort of stuck in my own head. In college, it got to the point where I couldn’t even order a pizza, because I would go over the conversation, the options, the choices, in my head so many times. You can imagine why I couldn’t call you.”

“I had no idea it was that bad,” I said. “I mean, I knew you were shy, that maybe you worried about stuff, but I had no idea.”

“It’s okay, really.” Now it was Blake leaning down, dropping his face into the line of my gaze. “Because I’ve kind of figured myself out. First I went to a doctor, he gave me some

medicine, some kind of anxiety pills, and I took them for a while. But then I realized, that I just didn't feel like myself. I told myself, 'You can't let this ruin your life.'

I noticed how he leaned toward me as he spoke, how this time it was his hand brushing my knee. His shoulder bobbing against mine. "Blake, that's really amazing," I said. Now I was the one shifting uncomfortably. I pulled away. "But you know, I'm supposed to be getting married, Ernesto's supposed to be moving to South Dakota next year."

Blake didn't hesitate. "If that makes you happy, that's great. But I don't see a ring on your finger, and you're not married yet. All I'm asking for is a chance. So, my cousin's getting married next weekend, and then I'll be gone for two weeks for my Army summer camp. Will you come with me?"

By the time he asked the question, the edges of our bodies had been stitched up again—a tight seam from shoulder to knee. I answered, "We'll see." Within a few weeks, I was on the phone with Ernesto, explaining that my plans had changed.

The whole story—of how Blake had become my soldier—passed through my mind as I stood at the patio door, watching for Blake's return. He'd only gone to the gas station, had gone for cinnamon to satisfy my urgent craving, but as I waited for him to return, I imagined the urgency I would feel over the next year of my life: after Blake and I were finally married, after our baby was finally born, when I would be waiting for Blake to return from war.

I marveled at how Blake's activation had caught me off guard. The significant events and dates alone should have been enough to prepare me for my future as a military wife—Basic

Training and AIT, the 4th of July, Blake's first activation, our reunion on one Memorial Day weekend and the wedding we were planning for the next—but I'd been swept up in the dramatic change, the romance-novel narrative of it all. It seemed our roles had reversed, like Blake had become my something-to-come-home-to, like I had moved home to my happily-ever-after. So by the time we found out we were having a baby, by the time we began planning our wedding, I'd stopped thinking of Blake as my soldier and begun re-conceiving him as my husband, the father of my unborn child. And then Blake called with the news of his activation. His already deep voice rumbled like low static on an AM radio station when he said, "Amber, my unit's being activated."

"Your what? What does that mean exactly?" I waited for his response as the heat of my cell phone melted a flesh-colored film of make up onto to its own plastic face.

"It means I'm going to Iraq."

It was all so still new—the wedding plans and the baby names—that I had given myself permission to forget about the possibility of war until that moment, until Blake began apologizing for calling, not telling me face to face, for needing to get it off his chest, needing to just say it. I'd never really considered what it meant to be a military wife, not until that moment, when I found myself at the intersection of expected and unexpected, experiencing the word *activated*—really feeling it in my gut—and tasting the word *Iraq*. I realized that although I had known Blake essentially all my life, I was just learning to depend on the sound of his breathing to ease me into sleep at night, the slight weight of his hand on my bulging belly, to appreciate the fact that he would walk through snow for a few simple ingredients. I realized that soon he would be leaving and I wouldn't know when he was coming back.

From my perch at the patio door, I spotted Blake's lean body angling into wind-slung snow, his bare hand clutching a paper sack as he returned from the store. I blinked at the sight of him, then hurried to the kitchen and busied myself with the melting of butter and packing of brown sugar. I heard the security door rattle downstairs, and soon he was inside, smoothing his wet hair, handing me a little brown bag, inside a tiny red and white labeled shaker that probably cost four dollars at convenience store prices. I stopped him before he made his way back to the couch and kissed his full, smiling cheek.

Before the end of the night, Blake returned to the same store two more times—once for brown sugar, once more for ice cream. When he made those trips, I stayed in the kitchen, mixing ingredients, wiping counters, and washing dishes. I didn't want to watch him leave. Finally, after all his work, I settled in on the couch next to him, a warm bowl cradled in my hands, one craving satisfied, at least temporarily.

Temporary Home

Blake and I said our first married goodbye on July 15th, six weeks after our wedding, when I dropped him off outside the Sioux Falls Armory. Blake had been driving and parked in a gravel lot on the far side of the paved road that curved up to the building. When we met at the front of the car, I leaned into Blake as he placed his arms around me. “Should we head up there?” I asked, nodding toward the Armory. “No, let’s not. It will only make it harder,” he said. “Let’s just say goodbye here.”

So we did. I stood on tiptoes, resting my chin on Blake’s shoulder, my temple against his grainy, close-shaven cheek, studying the clouds and sky over his shoulder as I cried. When contained sobs jerked my shoulders, Blake assured me, “It’ll be all right.” He repeated the words over and over again, and I tried to believe him, tried to breathe evenly and feign a sense of calm, but I couldn’t control my body.

I pressed my forehead against his, my palms against his smooth-shaven jaw. Tears streamed from my pinched eyes. I pulled back, embarrassed at the way my nose and eyes dripped, at the way I had lost control again. I apologized. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t . . .”

“Don’t be sorry,” Blake said. “You have every right to be sad.” But I could feel the tension in his muscles, the way his back stiffened with each of my sobs. I knew this was difficult for him. I was making it difficult. After a long, slow breath, Blake said he had to head inside.

“I can at least walk you up there,” I said.

He nodded as he hugged me. “No. It’s not gonna get any easier, Amber. I’d really rather have our own goodbye, not in there with everyone else.”

I knew he was right, so I hugged him, framed his face with my hands again, and kissed him goodbye. Then I watched him walk away. He met up with another camouflaged soldier in the dirt parking lot, and together they made their way towards the burnt-red brick building. There, his figure disappeared into a crowd of soldiers and families, and I realized Blake had parked as far away from the crowd as he could, given me the best goodbye he knew how to give.

I left the Armory and started driving home, then realized I had gone the complete opposite direction of home. I pulled into a Burger King parking lot to cry.

A month later, I had moved into my new apartment and put myself to work establishing a temporary home for myself and my soon-to-be-born son. I stitched to the edge of gauzy, green and white fabric, my foot lifting, sewing machine halting, as I pushed a button to reverse my stitch, back tracking for added strength. I pulled aside the finished curtains and trimmed threads before heading into the master bedroom to put my work in place.

The bed, delivered from the furniture store earlier that day, was dressed with wedding gifts: fresh green, 500-count, Egyptian cotton sheets, a thin, gold down blanket, and a fine-quilted white comforter. I slid the curtains over an iron rod, then lifted them into place. I fell back against the bed to admire my work: green and white paper lanterns hung over the bedside table, the baby's changing table that I had painted white and lined with baskets woven in colors of spring. As I scanned the room, I noticed my mistake—the curtain hem angled slightly but steadily, so that the right side hung almost two inches shorter than the left. I was disgusted with myself, knowing that if I'd measured better, pinned more carefully, or checked my work half

way through like I was supposed to, I'd have perfect curtains. But I wasn't going to worry too much about it. No one would see them anyway, tucked away in the master bedroom of the apartment I lived in alone. I stepped into the hallway and switched off the bedroom light.

I made my way to the living room, where Blake smiled at me from an antique frame perched on an old ladder with chipping white paint. I settled in on my new sectional couch, its cushions still firm, fabric still smelling faintly of the protective plastic it was delivered in. Before I could close my eyes, I noticed Blake peering down at me from a wedding portrait framed in old barn wood. He was everywhere in the apartment, and yet I was alone. He was only an accessory, a decoration perched on the wall.

Blake had been in the apartment once, when it was still empty, a few days before he left for Fort Dix, when we had spent a day apartment hunting. I had spent the day trying not to cry while we toured run down apartments with loose oven doors and stained carpeting, one overly-fancy apartment with a hotel-style lobby and silent hallways in which I couldn't imagine a baby crying. This two-bedroom apartment had been the last one we toured that day, and when the landlord left us alone for a few minutes to talk things over, Blake's voice ricocheted off empty walls as he said, "I hate to push, here, Amber, but what are we gonna do? We have to do something."

"I know," I answered, crying again. "I just can't handle it. I don't want an apartment for *me*. It is supposed to be for *us*." I fell back against the wall and slid down to the thick, tan carpet, landing just as the baby did a barrel roll and wedged himself under my ribs. I inhaled and placed my hand over the bulge of our baby. "I never pictured it like this."

Blake acknowledged my discomfort, asking, "What's the little jerk doing now? Do we need to find you a pop can or something?" The little jerk was a term of endearment for our

unborn son. The pop can was a trick I'd read about: holding a cold can against the stomach to get the little jerk to move when he was positioned awkwardly. "Should I have a talk with him?" Blake asked. "Tell him who's boss? You don't want the little jerk getting too uppity even before he's born."

"I'll be fine," I laughed. "But you should be careful who you refer to 'the little jerk' in front of, you know. I was waiting for you to say it in front of the fancy-pants lady over at Canterbury Estates."

"I never would've said that," Blake said, sliding down the wall to take a seat beside me.

When I rolled my eyes in his direction, I noticed raised eyebrows framing his narrow blue eyes and tense face. He was nervous. But not fidgety nervous like he had been in the lobby at Canterbury Estates, where Blake perched on the edge of a curved couch, framed in carved wood and upholstered in scrolling red flowers. This time worry slowed his gestures and weighed on his face. He exhaled, slouched, stared straight ahead. This wasn't the family life he had planned for, either. Even before we found out about the baby, he'd been talking about an Army job in Alaska, the grad schools I could apply to there, a plan that would keep us together. I didn't want to make this any harder for him.

"Well, maybe you wouldn't have said that. But what about how you kept telling her, *'Well, she'll be living here, by herself, at least until she has the kid.'*?" I lowered my swollen eyelids into a look of mock disapproval. "You acted like it had nothing to do with you. So that fancy-pants lady probably thinks you've got another wife and you're just paying the way for me and your bastard baby."

"Yeah, that wasn't very smooth," Blake admitted.

"And the look on her face..."

Blake nodded in agreement, “Like ‘*Who are these two idiots?*’”

“And she didn’t even know our son was a jerk.”

Blake laughed, his face relaxing in increments. I smiled and tilted my head until it rested on the sharp curve of his shoulder. “It wouldn’t have mattered,” he said. “It seemed like a place where they’d kick you out if your kid cried in the middle of the night. As soon as we walked in, we all knew we were never gonna live there anyway.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering the weight of the day on our future, “You’re right. *We* never were.”

Blake stood, pacing the living room a couple times before pausing to look out over the small balcony, the green park and bike trails outside that disappeared into a row of mature trees. “I know this isn’t the way you imagined it,” he said, “but we still need an apartment. Even if we quit for today, we’d just have to do it again tomorrow, and I actually like this place. With the underground parking, you’ll never have to scrape your windows in winter and I won’t have to worry about you slipping on ice when you’re lugging the baby’s car seat around.”

I smiled at his concern. “I know. And I like the walk-in closet and the laundry hook ups in the bathroom. So let’s just get it over with, go down and see if the manager is here so we can sign a lease. Just make sure this time that it doesn’t sound like I’m having an illegitimate child.”

“Deal,” he said. “I’ll just do the introductions right away: This is my wife. She’s an idiot. But I’m an even bigger idiot. And our unborn son’s a jerk.” We signed the lease that day, then drove back to my parents’ house for Blake’s combined birthday and going away parties.

So as I decorated the apartment, Blake peering at me from photos, I tried to remember his presence. That brief moment we had spent together there. I unpacked boxes and positioned blankets over the back of the couch, trying to fill the empty spaces with enough objects to absorb

the sound of my footsteps, the voices of the actors and talk show hosts that kept me company. I filled the changing table baskets with diapers, baby wipes, and burp rags. I decorated walls to make the place feel homey. I covered pillows with thick upholstery fabric matching the color scheme of each room, zig-zagging raw edges to secure seams, to ensure that the home I was piecing together would last. I searched antique and thrift stores for affordable, lived-in accessories that carried memories, even if not my own.

When I scanned the living room, I noticed the combination of old and new. New TV. Primitive bench for a TV stand. New couch. Antique artist's desk for a telephone table. Pieces of the past and present that I brought together in an attempt to construct a future. Blake was one of the new pieces. His possessions still lived at his dad's house: t-shirts, dingy socks, and jeans with worn knees lining the drawers of a dresser in his old bedroom upstairs; trophy deer and Carharts hanging from nails in the garage; a baseball uniform, unwashed after the last game he played in July, stuffed in a duffle bag downstairs. His life up to that point had not been lived with me; his present was in the Middle East, not in the small Sioux Falls apartment with me. Still, having known each other all our lives, we had our own history. Our grandmothers had served Ladies Aid dinners together long before either of us were born; our aunts and uncles had been classmates and played on the same baseball and basketball teams. We were a combination of old and new, too, and our history gave me hope for the future.

When I wanted to cling to that hope, think of the future, I went into the guest bedroom. I turned on the light and slid open the closet, cracking the door, then wiggling in a shoulder to nudge the folding door over thick carpet. I pulled shopping bags from the shelf and spread their contents over the patchwork bedspread my mom sewed us as a wedding present. I lifted a pair of brown fine-wale corduroy pants and folded them over a plastic hanger, then buttoned a green and

brown plaid Columbia shirt over the top. *This would be good for a business casual day once Blake gets home and starts work, I told myself. But it isn't too pretentious. He'll wear it. I think.*

I hung another pair of cords with a grey and white striped button up. *This one's casual enough, he could wear it with jeans.* I imagined dinner out, a night at the movies.

I lifted a green, sueded long-sleeved tee to my cheek, imagined Blake and I snuggled in front of the TV, the warmth of his body behind the soft cotton. I folded the t-shirt with a pair of straight-fit GAP jeans I bought from the sale rack in hopes that they might replace the droopy carpenter jeans Blake had been wearing since high school. I folded flannel pajama pants and added them to the pile along with one package of white Hanes crew necks, one of white sweat socks, another of grey boxer briefs. My hope filled a closet.

By the end of September, I had settled into the apartment, had anchored myself in my temporary home. Blake was still in Fort Dix, still not overseas, still far from combat. I had settled into my loneliness, had not yet confronted any real fears. So, when Blake called with the good news—that he'd be coming home for a few days, for a “family weekend” before finally heading overseas—I felt lucky to receive this gift the Army was giving our families: a chance to reconnect before the twelve month deployment began. A re-goodbye. I wanted to do a better job this time.

Letting Go

On the last Sunday of September, 2009, Blake and I sat watching TV. I shrunk into his arm, curled over the back cushion behind me. We had spent the last two and a half days—the entirety of his “Family Weekend”—in Bryant, sleeping at my parents’ house, eating dinner at Blake’s Grandma’s, driving around with Blake’s dad and brothers, scouting deer for the upcoming archery season. Now we sat in my apartment—*our* apartment according to the lease—because I had been determined that Blake would see the place furnished and sit on the new couch, even if he would leave for Iraq without having ever slept in our new bed. I had insisted that we stop by the apartment before going to the airport. I wanted a memory of Blake to make the apartment feel like our home, to keep me company over the coming year. But as we sat in front of the TV, I realized we had both begun to retreat.

I don’t remember any of the words we exchanged. I’m sure we spoke. I probably asked Blake if he thought the couch was comfortable. He probably commented on the place I’d found for the rickety old bookshelf he’d watched me strengthen and varnish, the way it looked so much better—not like a piece of junk bought for a dollar at a garage sale. But we didn’t talk about anything significant. We had both begun to drift away into silence, like it was the only thing left.

With less than an hour before we had to leave for the airport, I remembered the crib. I had fought with that damn crib for hours as I waited for Blake’s plane to come in three days earlier, but I couldn’t complete it—couldn’t hold the crib ends at the correct ninety degree angles while I dropped the front piece into the metal brackets that were supposed to hold it. I didn’t have enough hands. I had planned to finish the project when Blake arrived, when he was there to help, but we had better things to do with our two days than put together a crib. Blake had things

he wanted to do, people he wanted to see, during his three days of freedom. And then, when we were finally in the apartment, when I finally had a chance to ask Blake for help, I didn't.

I stood without any explanation, went into the bedroom, and set to work. I knocked the rail around, rattled pages illustrating the ease of sliding pressed wood into place, but when I followed instruction, the top of the rail slid in as the bottom slid out. "Damn it," I said. Then after a couple more tries, "This fucking thing's driving me crazy." I swore loud enough to be heard over the TV, hoping Blake would come in and rescue me.

Instead, he called from the couch. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to put this damn thing together," I explained. "The crib."

"Do you have to do it now?"

I wondered, *If not now, when? Tomorrow? When you're at Fort Dix? In a few weeks, when you're in Iraq and I'm here alone with a baby?* I felt sadness pulling, spiraling, and knew I couldn't follow it down. I had told myself I wasn't going to lose it, that I was going to do a better job, make goodbye easier this time.

Still, I wanted his help. I wanted Blake to descend into my sea of fears, grab me by the hair, and pull me up. I wanted him to secure our future somehow, if only by snapping a crib rail into place. But I couldn't ask. I was afraid that if I asked for help, I'd panic like a drowning swimmer trying to claw her way to the surface and we might both be sucked down. Or if Blake did get me to the surface, pull me up for air, I was afraid that when my lungs filled with air, I would name my fears, and then the dreamlike images—humvees that rattled in my brain, the funeral procession carrying a casket blanketed by a flag, the single mother swaddling her baby in a body bag—would become leaden and weight us both down. It would have to wait. I wouldn't need the crib for at least two weeks anyway.

Of course, I didn't know then that I'd never need it, that George would never actually sleep in that crib, because when we slept alone in the apartment, George would always occupy Blake's empty side of the bed. But I did know that someone else could help me assemble a crib, but I needed Blake to relax me, trace circles on my shoulder, draw me to the surface of my skin. I needed his silence, his temperament, even like a placid lake. I returned to the couch and curled into Blake's body, breathing him in.

When Blake and I walked hand in hand into the airport, I felt calm, ready for our second married goodbye. Blake wore civilian clothes—a burgundy polo tucked into olive green cargos—the same ones he'd shown up in three days before, when I smiled and said, “You didn't have to wear your uniform.” I wore an eyelet lace, red maternity top with cap sleeves, one I bought especially for Blake's weekend home, one that made me feel pretty even at thirty-eight weeks through my pregnancy. With no camouflage to attract strangers' stares, in the airport that day Blake could have been just a business man, a sales rep dressed casually, off to visit a client in a neighboring state. We could have been a family floating on certainty, with a crib assembled in a nursery painted sea green, a route to the hospital planned, months of happiness ahead. Instead, we were newlyweds saying our second goodbye in four months, facing a year of separation.

I didn't expect to see familiar faces in the airport on a Sunday afternoon, so my plan was to stay outside of myself, to imagine how Blake and I might look from someone else's eyes: that business man being dropped off by his wife; a fortunate young couple expecting a baby. But my

strategy backfired when we ran into our high school science teacher, Mr. Dorman. “Where are you guys headed?” Mr. Dorman asked. “A little trip somewhere?” His questions pushed me below the surface of possibilities into the strong current of reality.

I started an answer, “Blake is . . .,” and my throat seized. I had no air to breathe. Tears puddled along my eyelids. I tried to balance the sadness there, but when I blinked, it spilled over and scampered down my cheeks.

“Actually, just me,” Blake said. “I’m headed back to Fort Dix, then overseas to Iraq.”

Once the words were spoken, our future named, I felt myself plunging down. Some part of me was aware of the rational reality—that the chances of Blake’s dying at war were mathematically slim, that a year would pass quickly, that at least our son was a baby who wouldn’t know to miss his father—but that was a distant reality that bobbed on the light white surface above me while I plunged into fear, my short breaths bubbling up around me. I felt as if I might drown as I remembered the apartment, the crib still missing its front rail, the incompleteness of everything.

Unwinding my fingers from Blake’s, I imitated the way his hands dangled, shoulders hung, relaxed. I closed my ears to the conversation and fixed my eyes on a rack of dream catchers dangling in the souvenir shop. My eyes crossed slightly, the strings blurred and doubled into a tighter weave, and by the time Mr. Dorman shook Blake’s hand and said, “Well, best of luck to you. Thank you for your service,” my body had relaxed.

I let go of the fears, incompletes, and uncertainties and told myself to cling to more solid things: a timeline—two and a half weeks until the due date, twelve months of deployment, a countdown to Blake’s homecoming, a counting towards George’s first birthday—and my role as a soldier’s wife, a woman who would bake cookies for care packages, nurse and nurture her son,

give her husband something to come home to. I couldn't be strong for myself, but I could be strong for someone else.

Within minutes, Blake and I had said goodbye. Without tears, without questions, I hugged him firmly. Acting like something solid and secure, something sure, I anchored him to home.

On Monday, less than twenty four hours after I left Blake off at the airport, I walked into the teacher workroom to heat water for a cup of tea. I punched one, one one—a minute and eleven seconds—then slid my finger down to hit start. The microwave roared, my orange cup spun inside, and I watched seconds of time tick down.

Counting down was such a relief. After Blake’s “family weekend,” he was back in New Jersey, and by week’s end, he’d leave for Iraq. It was a relief, even though I knew it wasn’t supposed to feel that way, even though I couldn’t say, “I’m so glad my husband’s finally leaving for Iraq.” No one in their right mind would actually say that. But his two months in Fort Dix had been a miserable sort of limbo. He was away from home, but his twelve month activation hadn’t started because he was still in-country, still only in training, not in active duty. The sooner he got overseas, the sooner we could start counting down to his homecoming. So I was happy, watching time disappear.

When the workroom door squealed open, I turned to find a parent volunteer—a nameless face I’d seen cutting laminated pictures according to teachers’ directions or filling bags of treats for back to school parties. When she asked how I was, I probably answered, “Fine.” Or maybe my unusual happiness spilled out and I said, “I’m doing really good, actually.” Maybe I paused to marvel at the feeling and added, “Yeah, I’m doing great.”

I must have turned the question back to her, listened to her answer and smiled, because we kept talking until the small talk twisted into a knot and we found ourselves tangled in misunderstanding.

I think I first noticed a change in her face as I turned back towards the microwave to check the time. Maybe there were fifty-one seconds left when I felt her narrowing eyes. Maybe she jutted her chin forward, and leaned towards me when she said, “Is this your first year at the school?”

“Nope,” I answered. “My second, but I probably look different now.” I smoothed my maternity blouse.

“Right,” she said. “Yeah, I thought you looked familiar, but . . .” and then she paused, maybe almost gasped, her eyes widening as nodded and her finger bobbed. “Oh, *you’re* the one whose husband is in Iraq.”

My chest deflated. If I hadn’t been so relieved that Blake would soon be in Iraq, I probably would’ve corrected her, explained that he wasn’t there *yet*, that it would be a few days before he actually left. But I embraced the odd relief and tried to shrug off her observation. Maybe I laughed under my breath at the ironic happiness and said, “Yep, that’s me. My husband’s . . .” before she cut me off.

“But you . . .” she stopped. And I do remember the pause, the loss of words. I want to image the microwave’s detonating beep in the silent space, but the time couldn’t have gone off. Still, my eyebrows cinched, head began pulsing, body seemed to spin as if dangling when she finished, “you look so . . . good?”

I wonder if I imagined her voice rising in disbelief. Or did she really mean what I thought she meant? That if my husband was in Iraq I had no business looking good or finding ways to be happy. That I should spend my days crying. That if I really loved him I’d walk around, shoulders hunched, speaking in a monotone voice. That when people asked how I was

doing I should answer “Not so great.” or “Pretty awful, really.” Maybe she sensed my odd relief and thought I was a horrible person. Or maybe it was just me.

Out of Frame

Two weeks later, George was born, on October 17th.

My dad was there, tugging his khaki pants up at the belt as he paced in the hallway outside my room. He had driven me to the hospital and sat beside me when I checked in, but once I changed into my hospital gown and settled into my tilted back bed, he kept himself busy outside—reading the paper in the waiting room, fetching coffee for my mom and sister, and stepping into the room every once in a while to pat my shoulder with his thick-fingered hand.

My sister was there, too. When the time came to enter the operating room, she held my hand as the hospital bed squeaked to the elevator, then she returned to the room to slip into papery blue surgical clothes. After my epidural and after a blue curtain was draped over my waist, she entered the cold room, squinting a smile from between her puffy cap and white surgical mask. When the delivery began, Erin assumed her responsibility, videoing George's first cry and Dr. Wierda's exclamation, "Not much hair here—he's a baldy!" She snapped pictures of George's pursed lips and open-mouthed screams; his clenched fists against the cold metal of a scale that reads eight pounds, eight ounces; the slits of his eyes pinched tight beneath a pink and blue striped cap. She recorded everything so Blake could experience the birth of his son.

Blake's dad was there, too, but I didn't know it until I was wheeled back to my room after the c-section. My legs were still numb, and I was waiting for George to be returned from

the nursery when my dad reported that Mark and Blake's Uncle Les had been waiting downstairs since before I went into the operating room.

Wearing his two-tone aqua dress shirt and black leather coat, Mark finally made an appearance in my room. He stood behind Les, who lunged in for a hug, his voice booming, "He's a gorgeous one, baby girl. You did good." Mark took one step closer and added proudly, "He looks just like his dad, with those squinty little eyes. But he's got his Grandpa Win's hands. Like baseball mitts."

Mark and Les had stood outside the nursery and watched as nurse's pricked George's heel and did their routine checks for reflexes and lung capacity. "George wasn't any too happy about that," Mark said.

"No he wasn't," Les said. "He let 'em know it, too."

Mark shook his head in agreement, then smiled as he said, "But, man, did you see the size of his hands? That kid'll be able to palm a basketball when he's ten."

I smiled, making a mental note to share these comments about George's gigantic baby hands with Blake, knowing those would be the stories he would share with his buddies. I smiled, too, at how endearing it was to see Mark blushing with excitement over his first grandson, to know that he'd come to the hospital even before he was born. "They'll be bringing him back here any minute," I said. "Then you can hold him."

"No, I think I'd better get going," Mark said, glancing at his thick brown shoes, then back up at me as he finished. He seemed nervous, as if he felt like an intruder. "But, he's perfect, Amber. You did a real good job." He stepped towards me, and I pressed my hands into the thin mattress, preparing to lift my shoulders up for a hug. I wanted to thank him for coming, wished I could tell him how his being there made Blake seem closer. But Mark leaned slightly towards

me, then awkwardly jerked back and reached out to shake my hand. “He’s perfect, Amber. Thank you.”

A little while later, a bouquet of daisies and roses was delivered from the gift shop. The card perched in the tongs of a plastic fork read: Love, Grandpa Mark.

When my cell phone rang, my family scattered. Someone whispered, “It’s Blake,” and even the nurse who had come in to check my vitals said she’d come back in a little while. It was an important phone call. But only two details from that conversation stuck in my memory.

The first was Blake’s cryptic response when I asked how long he would be in Kuwait: “I can’t say, exactly.” I breathed in the silence that followed, the silence that reminded me how much our lives had changed over the previous months, how different my life was from Blake’s, how little we understood about each other at that moment. But Blake offered the most he could, more than he probably should have, with the words, “Let’s just say you and I will probably be traveling at the same time.”

The second was the way I stroked the red, flaky skin of George’s tightly curled fingers and said, “He’s perfect,” the way Blake answered, “I’m sure he is.”

For the next two days, I lay in a family suite in Sioux Valley hospital wearing a white robe and a wristband matching the tiny one on George’s ankle, while Blake slept in a tent, acclimatizing himself to the Middle Eastern desert, wearing an army uniform and a set of dog tags. Then as my sister drove me home from the hospital with my newborn son, my husband and the rest of Charlie Battery made their way to Baghdad. I stared out the window of my Chevy Impala, wishing it wasn’t my sister behind the wheel, imagining my husband bouncing over

desert roads in a Humvee. My tears blurred the brilliant colors of fall leaves into a camouflaged mess of greens and browns.

Funny War Story

I was sorry before I even hung up the phone.

Blake had been overseas for less than two months, and we'd talked a handful of times—sometimes easy, flowing conversations sprinkled with laughter, other times awkward, fumbling ones peppered with pauses. Sometimes when I described the sleeping and eating habits of our newborn son, the comforting heat of his body curled tight against my shoulder, Blake seemed to understand, or at least to want to understand. But other times, he seemed unprepared for the stories about the son he didn't know, the joy he could not yet imagine.

On the night of this phone call, Blake was talkative, his voice a punctuated snare drum roll. I leaned into the phone.

And then he said, "So here's a funny war story . . ."

My ears perked at the unusual phrasing. I froze like a cat waiting to detect the source of an unusual, almost inaudible sound—the rumbling of a distant storm, maybe. I agreed to listen, saying, "Okay," but the word lingered in my mouth too long, giving doubt the opportunity to pull the final syllable up into a question.

"So, the other night," he began, "I'm holding the light for the medic, and he's shooting morphine into this Iraqi Policeman, this IP whose got a hole in his guts. We're waiting for the ambulance to show up, and then all the sudden the IP just gets up and says he's gonna walk home." Blake chuckled and went on. "And so he did. He just got up and walked home."

Blake chuckled again, and I shuddered, as if the rough edges of a deep fault line were grinding past each other, their noise contained within a thin skin. I'd never heard him laugh like that before. The laugh was soft, almost inaudible—not like the hearty laugh that bubbled from

him when he watched Adult Swim, or the quick staccato laugh that spilled from him when he'd been drinking. This laugh—this chuckle—rumbled inside him, and I felt it beneath me, seismic waves moving up through the mass of my heels and into my body.

I stared into the shadowed living room, trembling, trying to release the breath that swelled in my chest, but Blake's laugh held me at the crest. He must have sensed my confusion, the shaking of my head, because his laugh was suddenly swallowed up, like the vibrations of a bass drum dampened by a hand.

“Why'd I tell you that?” he asked. “I can't believe I told you that. I'm sorry . . . “

I tried to shake words free from my throat, but my mouth hung open, empty.

He apologized again, but I was sorry, too—for not understanding, for not trusting him enough at that moment just to ask why it was funny, why he laughed. I couldn't ask, though, because I was afraid that the answer was a rock forming inside of him, a mass in his chest—the necessary detachment of a soldier, emotions held inside, being compressed into callousness.

Before I could think, analyze, or rationalize, I was swept away by regret.

“Don't worry,” I said. But I couldn't think of anything else to add—not until five years had passed. Only then would I finally ask Blake why it was a funny story, and even then, after he explained the dark humor of someone fearing an ambulance ride across Baghdad more than he feared walking home to die, I didn't understand.

I wish I could have laughed, but I couldn't, and I'm afraid I still can't. I still wonder about this fault line within him, imagine the plates of his experience in Iraq held precariously, feel the threat of those plates slipping, the sudden release of built-up emotion.

Survival Strategy

“I’m on a roll here,” Mom said. “Feel a Yahtzee coming on.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” I answered flatly, inking in open squares on my score card. “I can’t roll anything. This might be an all time low score.” We sat in mom’s kitchen, steam rising from coffee cups as we passed dice back and forth between us in a heavy leather cup. The house was still, with George already sleeping on the chambray sheets of his crib and voices bubbling at low volume from the TV while dad snored on the couch.

“Well, give me a break,” she said, trying to keep the conversation light hearted. “You usually beat me by a hundred. Tonight just happens to be my night.”

I had a reputation of being the gamer in the family: lucky in Yahtzee, a whiz at Rummikub, and so fast at Nertz that my cousins and siblings always accused me of cheating. My mom had taught me to play Yahtzee, pulling the game out on snow days and packing the dice, cup, and score cards in her suitcase when we took road trips to Minneapolis or the Black Hills. So she relished the opportunity to beat me at her game. But I wasn’t feeling lucky that night. I was feeling sorry for myself and angry at Blake, who I hadn’t talked to in two weeks.

While mom finished her turn, I leafed through old score cards, wondering why we’d kept them all. Some were yellowed, others stained with water or coffee marks, and most were already claimed, names and nicknames printed in a child’s mixture of upper and lower case letters, some sprawling in uneven cursive, others carefully penned in the stylized autographs kids practice in middle school. If I looked, I knew I could find Blake’s sharp cursive. He’d played with mom and I a few times. He was terrible at the game, always rolling for high-scoring combinations and having to zero out half his score card. But I wasn’t looking for Blake’s card. I was trying not to

think about him that night. Playing Yahtzee was supposed to distract me, but it wasn't working. My body stiff, shoulders pressed into the spindle-back chair, my face pinched, I thought to myself, *There's no way he hasn't had a chance—a minute even—to call me in the last two weeks.*

Each time my turn came around, I knocked dice around in the cup, their sounds imitating the clatter of my thoughts, the stutter of steady gun shots. *Doesn't he know how crazy this makes me? It can't be that hard to call just to tell me he's okay.* I spilled dice onto the table, watching them skid to a stop. I counted black pips like days between phone calls, labouring over each one. I'm sure Mom had to snap me back to the game at hand more than once, asking things like, "Are you gonna take a zero somewhere, or use up your chance?"

In Yahtzee, chance is an open combination. A place to dump a crappy turn. The dice don't have to match up or complete a pattern. A player can just add the face values of the dice and tally the score as chance. Make the best of an otherwise useless turn. That was exactly what I needed to do—make something good come out of an awful night, even though I couldn't turn it into what I really wanted, which was, of course, to talk to Blake. I had to remember all the reasons why Blake might not be calling: his schedule changing back and forth from side-by-sides with Iraqi policemen during the day to patrol and security missions at night; the nine-hour difference between Baghdad and home that made timing calls difficult; the physical exhaustion he felt after missions, and the emotional strain he was feeling the whole time; the long line of soldiers waiting to call home. I couldn't control or change the dice I was rolling, so I either needed to take a zero or use up my chance. I told myself to breathe. *Just relax. He never calls this late, so let it go for tonight.*

But no matter how hard I tried to stay near the surface of the quiet evening, enjoy the peace of George's breathing in the next room, the dull clatter of dice inside a red-felt lined cup,

emotion crept back in. *Lots of soldiers call their wives every day. Just call, Blake. Please. I need to hear your voice.* I tried to will him to call me, even though I knew his calling was as unlikely as my rolling a Yahtzee—in order for it to happen, every one of the five dice needed to fall into place.

The truth was that I was scared. I was sitting at my mom's kitchen table rolling dice, playing the odds of dice falling in required patterns to earn meaningless points. But what odds was Blake playing against? I didn't want to know, really, because the few details I had were terrifying enough. Two men from Blake's unit had died, two more were hospitalized, still fighting for their lives. Blake had accidentally told me about the IP with his guts blown out. Obviously, Blake was less than safe. I tried not to let the thought take shape into words, but it ricocheted, bounced around in the silent cavity of my mind. *Blake could die.* I needed to hear his deep voice, a fact that could verify his life.

As I obsessed over the possibility of Blake not returning from war, I tried to approach the situation strategically, remind myself that he didn't have to die. That anyone can die at anytime for any number of reasons. That most soldiers make it home alive. But I hadn't talked to Blake in two weeks, and that silence was an open-ended question, an opening up of possibilities. What would break the silence? Ever since the news of Richard Schild and Daniel Chuka's deaths, I'd been wondering about families. About mothers and wives and how they received the news. About how quickly they heard, who told them their loved ones were dead. I had an image in my head from some movie or television show I'd seen of a woman opening her front door to find men in uniform, the woman collapsing on her porch, boards creaking beneath her as the men reported a soldier's death.

So there was this fear, rattling around in my brain, and it clamoured against a perverse sense of relief. The relief was something I had discovered when I imagined military officials trying to contact me in the case of an emergency. When I thought about that possibility—that something may have happened, that terrible news might be making its way towards me—I doubted whether Blake had ever changed his emergency contact information after we were married. It seemed like just the kind of thing Blake would forget to do—update his paperwork—so I told myself that these military officials would probably find Blake’s dad first, or his brother, Brock, maybe. Then they would be the ones to tell me. The news wouldn’t come from strangers, I told myself. So even when I felt myself drowning in panicked thoughts of something happening to Blake, Brock—who’d been one of my best friends since long before Blake and I started dating—was a source of calm for me.

I thought about Brock and how nice it would be to talk to him, when mom gave a little cheer and announced her score. “Woo hoo, 364!” Her excitement jerked me back into the kitchen, into the present, the game of Yahtzee. I tapped pen to table and tried to tally my score.

“So, what do you think? Should we play again?” mom asked.

I held my breath and closed my eyes, thinking, *You know what, Mom? I’m pissed at Blake because he hasn’t called for two weeks. And I’m pissed, too, because I’m afraid he could be dead. But I can’t be mad. That’s just not allowed. I’m not supposed to be scared, and I’m not supposed to be mad. I’m just supposed to sit here playing Yahtzee.* I felt the urge to vocalize these fears, but I knew my mom couldn’t handle them.

She was right there, and I knew she’d want to pull me out of my fear if she could. If I stretched my hand out, her freckled arm was right there, but I couldn’t grab on. Mom couldn’t swim. I tried to teach her once in a hotel pool. She learned to arch her back and float in the

three foot water, but when I led her into deeper water, she sensed it. Her shoulders stiffened, her feet scratched for bottom, she panicked and grabbed on to me. I knew the water of my worries was too deep for her. And even if it weren't, her concern was once removed. She cared about Blake, but we'd only been married a few months. I was her daughter, George her grandson. George and I were her primary concern. So she understood, but not exactly. And she could throw out distractions—a game of Yahtzee, a craft project, a shopping trip—buoys to keep me afloat, but she couldn't rescue me. If I grabbed on to her, because I knew I would pull her down. I needed a stronger swimmer to rescue me.

* * *

When we were kids, Brock used to dunk me. I was a fair-skinned farm girl who went swimming at night after feeding calves and milking cows. He was a town kid, with tan skin and sun-bleached hair tinged green with chlorine. He spent all day every day at the Bryant Pool. And he attacked weaker swimmers like me from the edge of the pool or the diving board, jumping on my back, pushing his weight against me as I struggled, my arms and legs flailing, chlorinated water churning around me and absorbing my screams. Every time I sunk under his weight, I clawed at his tight grip on my shoulders and believed I was drowning. I felt my lungs filling with water, my body going limp and beginning to fall. But just when I thought I was nearing the bottom of the deep end, I would emerge, gasping, and feel sun on my skin, water stinging my nose. I would grip the gritty cement of the pool side and pant, pull myself up, and vow to never get in the water again. But that night at my parent's kitchen table, despite this history, I thought that maybe Brock could save me.

I knew he was probably bellied up to the bar down the street from my parents' house. I could walk down the street and find him, and I could explain things to him—really be honest with him—because he understood Blake, and he understood me. Brock was in my class in high school and Blake two years behind us, so people often assumed it was Brock I was dating, not Blake. Even after Blake and I got married, people often slipped and asked me about my husband, Brock. But as soon as Brock and I became close friends in high school, he picked up on my interest in his younger brother. And he encouraged us. So one day when Blake and Brock were driving around looking for deer with their dad and Blake announced the news that we were having a baby, Brock pulled his diesel truck over to the side of the road where he and his dad got out and flailed their arms, snapped their fingers, kicked their feet in the style of Rodney Dangerfield's Caddyshack dance. Or so the story goes. The next day, all of them drove to Watertown together to pick out an engagement ring, and Brock spotted Blake the money to buy it. Brock knew our story. And he also knew the reality of war better than me.

Brock had been in Iraq the year before. He had heard news reports of American soldiers found, dismembered, in Afghanistan and had woken at night to mental images of some guy cutting his brother's leg off. I knew he understood. He could swim against the current, coach me along. Still, I tried to talk myself out of calling him. I told myself that I was fine, that Blake would probably call the next day, and that I would make it through the night.

So when I heard the phone ring and turned instinctively to check the caller ID on the TV, I knew it couldn't be Blake. I hoped it would be, but knew the timing wasn't right. He had never called at this time of night. But I was relieved to see the second-best number possible framed in a gold in the top right corner of the screen. Usually only the string of ones, twos, and threes that displayed when Blake called from a Baghdad calling service consoled me; that night,

I smiled and jumped to my feet when I saw a local number below the name of the local bar, TJ's Tavern.

I could almost smell the Old Mil Light on his breath as Brock's voice stumbled over the phone line. "So . . . Amber. I was just sitting here wondering . . . what're you doing tonight?"

I was afraid my answer would sound too eager, so I paused, and before I could answer, Brock was talking again. "'Cause me and dad have been telling stories about Blake . . . that jerk . . . and we miss him. We sit here talking about him, and then I realize that if I miss his dumb ass this much, I can't imagine how much you do . . . how much you miss him. So . . ." His voice trailed off for a moment, maybe because he didn't want to say too much or overstep his bounds, or maybe because the beer was slowing him down. And I was too overwhelmed with relief to speak. Someone understood me. After a significant pause, Brock finished his thought, ". . . do you wanna come have a beer?"

I inhaled, found my voice, and said, "Yeah, that would be great."

I hung up and turned to my mom, grabbing a fleece from the back of my chair as I said, "George is asleep, so if it's okay with you I'm gonna go talk to Brock for a while. You can call if you need anything." Before she could answer, I heard the rumble of Brock's diesel truck in the driveway. She was nodding a response as I rushed out the door.

When I pulled back the passenger door and prepared to step up onto the running board, I heard the fizzing pop of a beer cap releasing and saw Brock's hand stretched in my direction, offering me a silver labeled bottle of Old Mil Light. We drove around for hours that night, listening to all our favorite songs and telling stories about Blake. As we drove down narrow dirt roads between ditches filled with dirty snow and dry crab grass, I heard about Blake's buck fever and his reputation for shooting deer in the ear, his hitting a home run in his first amateur baseball

at bat, and his aptitude as a batting practice pitcher in contrast to his inability to throw an alternator through glass. We sang every word of Desperado and Tracks of My Tears, dedicating them to Blake, interrupting our singing to puff our cigarettes, but when we came to Midnight Train to Georgia, it just wasn't the same with Gladys Knight and only one Pip, so we gave up singing for talking.

Brock started the conversation we both knew we needed to have. "I hate to ask, but have you talked to dumb ass lately?"

I dug through the cup holders in the arm rest between us and fiddled with change and shot gun shells as I shook my head no. "Almost two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Now it was Brock shaking his head as he popped open another beer. "That jerk. You know he could call you every day."

"But this is Blake we're talking about," I reminded him. Then to lighten the mood a bit, I added my standard line, "I know who I married."

"Yeah," Brock said, rolling his eyes, "I know the guy, too, and you're right, but . . . it's not fair."

"Maybe not," I said as I began to work my fingernail under the corners of the label on my beer bottle. "But it's not like talking every day would help. He spends the whole time trying not to tell me anything about what's going on over there. . . I spend the whole time trying to tell him stories about George, stories I already wrote in letters, stories I already told him." I peeled as much of the label as I could off the bottle in one, smooth, pull. "It always feels weird."

"Yeah, I know." Brock fixed his eyes on the gravel road ahead of him. "I remember when I was over there. Calling home was a double edged sword. I wanted to hear someone's voice, but then when I did it just made it harder to not be there, and all I was hearing about was

baseball and what's been going on at TJ's." His chest swelled as he pulled in a long drag of smoke, which he exhaled slowly as he said, "I didn't even have a kid to think about. All I had to miss was hunting, baseball, and beer."

I turned in my seat so I could see Brock's profile and started to tell him what I couldn't tell anyone else. "Of course I want to talk to Blake more, but it seems like I'm always saying, 'I know there's something else I was going to tell you . . .,' because I'm his wife and it seems like I should important things to say." I scraped at the gluey film left where my beer label used to be. It clung to my fingernails, so I collected the cold, wet mess with my thumb and began to roll it into a tight ball as I talked. "But then sometimes when I do remember, it's a story about George that I think Blake is going to love, and sometimes I can tell he doesn't get it. Like he has no idea how amazing it is to watch George smile at his own reflection in the mirror, has no idea what a big deal that is."

I glanced at Brock to see if he was still listening or if I had told him too much, if he had checked out. He stared straight ahead, but the squint of his eyes told me he was listening, so I continued. "And I just want to cry sometimes. Because Blake doesn't know what my life is like, how much I've changed now that I'm a mom, and I don't understand his, either."

I went to work on the smaller label on the neck of my now empty bottle as I prepared myself to admit one more thing. It came off in one satisfying sheet, which I rolled into a tight cylinder. I lifted it to my lips like a cigarette. "Sometimes I'm afraid that when he comes home he'll be different . . . that I won't know him anymore."

Brock answered quickly, a cigarette still dangling from his lips. "No, that's not . . ." He grabbed the cigarette and glanced at me as he said, "I can't say he won't have changed some, but he'll still be Blake."

I tossed the rolled up label on the dusty, rubber floor mat. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.” I began to relax, felt my body dispersing water, felt the air in my lungs pull me upward. “Because, you know what the best part about talking to him on the phone is? Even in the really bad conversations when I can’t think of anything to say, sometimes he laughs. A real laugh, one that just spills out. Then I know its still Blake I’m talking to, and I think everything *will* be okay.”

A few minutes later, when I stepped down from Brock’s truck onto my parents’ snow-packed driveway, I felt light. I skated over the snow and ice that still clung to the pavement, and when I had reached the door, I steadied myself with one hand on the doorknob so that I wouldn’t fall. And even though I knew Brock wouldn’t see me, I turned back and waved as he rumbled in reverse onto the street.

Inside the garage, I weaved through a maze of shovels, boxes, bikes and scooters to the doorway that led upstairs to my old bedroom. I knew I should shower and get some rest before George woke up, but I couldn’t bring myself to wash off the smell of cigarettes that reminded me of Blake. So I slept for a few hours in a recliner in front of the TV, resting my cheek on my own, smoky fleece. I woke at 5:30, knowing George would wake up any minute for a morning feeding, knowing that I could make it through the next six months without Blake, and knowing that I would talk to him soon. In the bathroom, I turned the shower knob all the way to hot before turning it on. When I stepped in, I lifted my face to meet the scalding beaded streams, savoring their sting. I cupped my hands to collect water, splashed it over my face, and drank it in.

Anesthesia

As I curled into the third seat of my mom's suburban, leather stuck to my skin, still rosy from a day in the sun, still damp with sunscreen and sweat. We'd spent our day posing for pictures with Santa, the seven dwarfs, and other characters at Storybook Land; we rode a magic carousel, walked through the enchanted forest and down the yellow brick road; and now my son, George, and his cousins had wilted into sleep in their car seats. My mom and sister chatted in the front seat. I slouched in the back, breathing slowly, nearing sleep.

Until I thought of Blake. And it wasn't a gentle, pleasant memory that coaxed a smile from me, but a sudden remembering that jolted me awake: it was the first time I had thought of him that day.

The sun was already dipping below the horizon of green, un-harvested corn fields before I finally thought about my husband, about how long it had been since I talked to him, about how long it might be before he'd be home from Iraq.

I sank lower in the seat, closed my eyes again, and tried to find him, tried to transplant myself to another place where I could feel his presence. I imagined the dusty haze that lifted from the upholstery of his dad's truck and found myself thirsty for the penetrating smell of smoke. I tried to drink it in, curling my fingers near my lips, imagining the smoldering taste of Blake's skin, yellowed with the heat of cigarettes. I closed my eyes to inhale the smell of his uniform after a weekend of smoke breaks at drill, but my lungs filled with the disappointing, chill of air-conditioning. I wanted to be somewhere with him—in the dugout after a baseball game, holding an Old Mil Light and huddling against him for warmth. I tried to summon him, but I couldn't.

And so I found my niece's travel desk, unrolled white paper from the pink plastic scroll, and began to write a letter I would never send. After a year's worth of words chosen carefully to convey how much I missed him, how much I hated living without him, how much better life would be when he returned, I bounced over the broken pavement of highway 25 and wrote:

Dear Blake,

I almost forgot to miss you today.

My stomach lifted up into my throat as I realized that Blake had become something far off. Something unpredictable. He had dissipated, slithered into the air in winding wafts of smoke. He had dissolved into memory and the dream of what a husband might be. In a month, he would begin his journey home from Iraq, but he was still drifting. I wanted to let go of the possibility of losing him, to start imagining what life would be like once he was home. But I couldn't trust it. Not until he was actually there with me. So I hung somewhere between anxiety and relief, suspended between consciousness and sleep, numbness and feeling.

* * *

I had experienced this numbness, this lack of feeling before—on October 17th, when our son was born. That day, I was dressed in a hospital gown, my wrist bound in a plastic band, a matching one a fourth its size waiting to cinch the ankle of my soon-to-be-born son, when my cell phone danced on the bedside table. I hadn't expected Blake to call until after the baby was born—he wasn't one to call too often or to make a big deal of things—but I knew it had to be him.

“Did you mix up the times or something?” I asked, “Because George isn't born yet.”

“No, I meant to call you before. I may have traveled half way around the world just to avoid being in the delivery room,” he said, laughing at his own favorite joke, “but I still wanted to talk to you before the baby was born.” And so we did. We talked about my sister, who was standing in for Blake in the delivery room. We talked about Blake’s dad and about my parents, who were already waiting to meet the baby. We talked until a nurse interrupted to prep me for surgery.

“Well, I guess it’s time for me to go,” I explained.

“Then I’ll talk to you in a few hours,” Blake said, pausing for a moment before adding, “so . . . good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said, fumbling for words as I faced the incongruity of it all: our son about to be born, Blake on the phone saying *good luck*, me lying in a hospital bed saying *thanks*. Blake’s absence, my sister’s bedside presence, my finding a way to be okay with it all. My voice cracked as I said, “Well . . . I love you.”

“I love *you*,” he said with a heavy *you*, like he always did.

Before disconnecting the call, I studied my phone and massaged its warm plastic and faux leather as if I could work free some lingering whisper of Blake’s voice. I fixed my gaze there, avoiding the eyes of my mom and my sister as a nurse wheeled me into a stainless steel room. I tried to imagine Blake beside me dressed in a blue surgical gown, his nervous eyes peering out from between the elastic of his puffy blue cap and the white of his surgical mask, but all I could see was him looking tall and resolute in his army uniform, the black beret he hated wearing folded stiffly in the fingers that curled at his sides. The image skittered away when a voice instructed me to scoot to the edge of the bed, lean forward, and relax. I followed orders.

Tears collected in the corners of my eyes as someone said something about a needle, something like, “This might hurt just a little bit.”

When my sister came into the operating room, she crouched behind the curtain hanging across my shoulders and offered a smile as someone dressed in blue said, “Let’s see where we’re at here. A little pinch to your heel—just let me know if you feel it.”

I felt a pinch and said, “Yeah, I felt that.”

When the blue-masked man repeated the routine a second time, I said, “Yeah, felt that a little bit, too.”

Still, he peered over the curtain at me and said, “All right, we’re ready to go here,”

But I had felt it. I knew I had. And no one—not my sister, the nurses, or the doctor—seemed to care. I imagined Blake beside me, again, his thick eyebrows raised, full lips sucking in a deep breath, fingers extending anxiously, flat palm pounding his knee. I longed for his uncertainty, for him to be there to believe me—to believe with me—that the anesthesia had not yet taken effect.

I sucked in icy air, stared into the glaring white ceiling, and thought, *Yeah, you can get started. You can cut me open, but I really did feel that pinch.*

I closed my eyes, clenched my teeth, and prepared to scream.

And then, nothing happened.

I felt nothing. No slicing pain, no swelling scream. I lay on the table, my arms stretched out, crucifixion style, secured with Velcro straps. I anticipated the most horrific pain I could imagine, and then didn’t feel anything. If I concentrated on the body I knew was still there, I

could conjure up some sense of pressure, of skin pulling and stretching. But really there was nothing. A void of sensation. A sort of limbo, suspended between two realities.

* * *

I didn't finish the letter I would never send. But if I had, I would have written this:

And that's how I feel about forgetting to miss you, Blake. It's a sort of suffering that I've come to expect to sweep over me several times a day—when the sound of George's rasping snore flashes me an image of you, pitching baseballs to a toddler you never rocked to sleep as a baby; when I watch TV and try to snuggle into the arm of the couch, wishing that arm would wrap itself around me, extend a soft-skinned hand to trace circles on my shoulder until it burns on my freckled skin—and when it doesn't come, I feel numb. As if half of me has died. And I want to scream, but I can't, because that is when I realize that if something does happen, if you don't come home from war, life will go on.

If you don't come home, I imagine that for a while it would feel like part of me were missing. Not just as if I couldn't feel my legs, but as if they were actually gone and I were nothing more than a bust, a resin form of head, neck, and shoulders, sitting still and lifeless on the shelf of a library or an office somewhere, where people pass by, pretending not to see me, my testimony to death and tragedy. But eventually I would start to feel a prickling numbness, a dead-heavy foot. And eventually that foot would twitch involuntarily, reminding me that I'm not completely broken, reminding me that it is still possible to feel, to move, to live. Then I would reach down and tug on that lead foot, drag it around for a while, until it gave in and started to wiggle and flex, then finally move freely.

And so I can't scream because I know it is a good thing—the fact that I wouldn't die without you—but I hate it at the same time. I know you would want me to move on—maybe run into that guy I always flirted with in college, the one I bumped into the summer before we were married, the one who asked my uncle if I was still single just weeks before our wedding—but I don't want to have to. I'm afraid of the possibility of losing you, of having to live without you. But I'm sick with knowing that somehow, eventually, I could do it.

Can you understand the guilt of that?

And can you forgive me?

I hope so, because even now, as I realized that life could go on without you, I know that you are always part of me and that you always will be, even if it seems like I am forgetting: whenever George's face transforms into yours with the furrow of a brow, the peak of eyebrows; whenever I enter a hazy bar, met someone's smoke circles on the street, or catch a whiff of burning autumn leaves; whenever the tinny, cheap twinge of Old Mil Light trickles from a sweating blue and silver can to my lips, making me long to inhale the smoke of you.

Breathing through the Night

During his deployment, Blake came home for two weeks. Two weeks that blurred past, like a sitcom stuck in fast forward—a dizzying sequence of family dinners, hunting expeditions for Blake, our son’s baptism. We slept each night at my parents’ house, never even stopping at the apartment I’d barely lived in while on maternity leave. Blake didn’t change a single diaper or feed George a single bottle, but he held his son and slept each night with his nose cuddled into George’s cheek.

Fifteen days later, Blake and I settled into black upholstered chairs across from an airport café where strangers sipped coffee and read the *Argus Leader*. It was our third goodbye in eight months of marriage, and I felt prepared, somehow. Poised for another goodbye. To our left loomed an oversized bronze statue of former fighter pilot and ex-governor of South Dakota, Joe Foss. As I eased our sleeping son from his car seat, I tried to silence the thoughts of Blake leaving, listening instead to the hum of an escalator moving toward the terminals above, the buzz of anxious travelers discussing destinations, itineraries, and vacation plans.

“Do you want to hold him?” I asked.

“Sure,” Blake said.

The stiff camouflage fabric of Blake’s uniform brushed my arm as I handed him our son, snuggled in soft fleece. As he peered into George’s face, studying the son he had met for the first time just two weeks before, Blake squinted. His lips curled into a soft smile. Then, without any warning, he turned away, inhaled a sharp, sudden breath, and stood in a business-like way.

“Okay,” he said, handing George to me like a bag of groceries. He looked away and smoothed his pants with the thin palms of his hands as he said, “Must be time to start heading up there. I better get up there, catch my flight.”

I recognized the transformation immediately. Blake had flipped the switch, stopping the emotional current of fatherhood from spilling over into the life he was returning to—the life of a soldier in Iraq. I dropped George in his car seat on top of buckles and straps, turned, and clung to my husband, trying to draw him back. I had always thought Blake looked tall in his uniform, but as I stretched my arms over his shoulders, he felt almost out of reach. His flight didn’t leave for another half hour. *You can stay longer*, I begged him silently, pulling him towards me. Then I surrendered. *Let him go*, I told myself. *You want him to stay longer, but he can’t.*

“Well,” he said as he paused to hug me one more time. “Everything will be all right.” He said it several times before I pretended to believe him. I watched Blake glide up the escalator, hoping he would turn back and wave, knowing that he wouldn’t.

* * *

All through my childhood, I was scared—scared of spiders, fires, tornadoes, death—and at bedtime my fears became unavoidable. Sometimes I lay in the dark imagining a fire that flickered in my closet and would engulf my room in flames when I closed my eyes. Sometimes I dreamed of a tornado ripping our farmhouse in half, twisting my parents away, leaving me behind in a room exposed like the backside of a dollhouse.

When I couldn’t sleep, my dad held me. My thin limbs curled in his sturdy embrace and my slick blonde hair spilled over his shoulder as he paced back and forth in front of the picture

window in our living room, pointing to a red light in the distance. My dad told me the light was *our* light and assured me that I would find it wherever I went. He never explained to me that the light originated from a radio tower or that similar lights spotted nighttime horizons everywhere. To me the light was a mystery—not white like a star, but a far away, unnamable, hypnotizing red—a distant symbol of comfort, protection, and connection that pulled my breath deeper, slower, and finally into sleep.

My dad proved that I could find our light anywhere when our family traveled to International Falls, Minnesota. On the first night of our trip, I couldn't sleep. I cried in a strange room on a bunk bed I was sure I would fall out of until my dad came in to ask me if I thought we could find our light. I don't know if I doubted him, continued to cry, or let his presence and his promise soak up my fears, but I remember the steady, plodding pace of dad's footsteps in front of an unfamiliar window that overlooked a jagged horizon glowing with city lights. There we found the familiar red glow of *our* light. I felt the breaths that lifted and lowered my dad's chest, and I let myself succumb to sleep.

* * *

From the moment he was born, George carried a burden of responsibility. At night, as he drifted off to sleep against the smooth satin of his favorite blanket, slowly relaxing his face, finally letting the pacifier fall from his lips, he acted as a living, breathing barrier between me and the empty side of the mattress. Then, as he slept, his face would contort into expressions that made him look like his dad. His eyebrows would raise—two tiny peaks lifting his forehead

in disbelief—then they would furrow into a deep, disgusted frown. His lips would curl, widening his cheeks with insincere laughter, and he would coax me along into sleep.

But George's presence also generated overwhelming fears that jolted me awake. *What if I roll over on him in my sleep? What if he squirms his way under my blanket?* Afraid that a stray corner of my bed pillow might smother him, I slept with a round throw pillow tucked under my ear. *Infant boys are more likely to die of SIDS, I had heard, especially in winter months.*

One night, I opened my eyes to discover a blue, contorted mess on the mattress beside me. When I frantically flipped on the light, I discovered that what I had mistaken for George's face was the blue of his baseball pajamas bunched up over the bulge of his belly. After turning the light off again, I rested my hand on his stomach and nestled my ear near his chest, listening to the reassuring sound of his breathing, forcing myself into the darkness of sleep.

Most of the time, the immediate fears of motherhood and the fragility that lay beside me on the bed created an alternative anxiety that helped me avoid thinking about the distant fears of war. But at times the paths of those fears intersected, merging the miracle of a child and the possibilities of the future into one blinding light. Without experiencing the terrifying frailty of life's beginning, would Blake understand what it meant to be a father? Would he recognize the steady rhythm of George's breathing that meant he was relaxing, giving in to the pull of sleep? When would he experience the hypnotizing heat of George's sleeping body weighing against his chest? It seemed unfair that Blake miss those moments of comfort and connection—unthinkable that he may never experience them at all.

* * *

During the summer following my sophomore year of college, I felt ready to live alone, so I subleased a trailer house from some friends. When I learned that the water smelled like rotten eggs and that the walls creaked in the wind at night, I gave up on living on my own. Each night I drove fifty miles to my parents' house to sleep. Each day I drove out of town to the trailer on my lunch break to make sandwiches and watch TV.

I did, however, stay at the trailer one night when my car broke down. I called my dad, who knew right away that the fan belt had broken. He offered to bring a new belt and get the car running again but said he couldn't make it until morning. I'm sure he heard the tears tightening my throat, because he made our conversation about work and weekend plans last longer than usual and then offered to call me later.

When he did, I was lying on a seventies-era couch upholstered in brown burlap streaked with orange and yellow. The fabric grated against my cheek as I stared at a glowing image of David Letterman. Most of our conversation replayed from earlier in the day, but my dad peppered the talk with long pauses that made it clear there was something he wanted to say. Finally he asked, "So, are you sitting by a window?"

"Nope. On the couch, watching TV."

"I bet you could find a red light," he said, "if you looked."

* * *

When Blake was gone, I spent most of my weekends, maternity leave, and the summer vacation that preceded my first year of graduate school at my parents' house in Bryant, a town with an official population of 396, buried in the hills of Eastern South Dakota. The cell phone

reception in Bryant is spotty at best, but during that time, my cell phone was one of the shreds attaching me to my husband. Since it happened to be a shred I could literally cling to, it became a permanent attachment to my body and a crucial component of my carefully constructed emotional stability.

When I found myself glancing at my phone every few seconds, studying the number of reception and battery bars I had at my disposal, counting and recounting the number of days since I last talked to Blake, I reminded myself, *You can't plan your life around the possibility that he will call*, and I forced myself out of the house. But even as my car sped along the highway or my feet tread over a sidewalk, I could *not* stop obsessing. I could feign indifference, resting my phone on the brim of my purse, perching it on the top of George's stroller, but behind the thin veil of nonchalance, my eyes darted to check the digital face of my phone.

One day after I had forced myself to get out for a walk, I came home and found my dad grinning in the living room.

"Well, there you are." He said. "How are you two?"

"Fine," I said, admiring a pair of John Deere pajamas I had bought for George at the church rummage sale.

"Did you talk to Blake?"

I cringed at the question and, since I didn't like the honest answer, chose to ignore him until he said, "Ber, didn't you talk to him?"

"No," I said, turning away.

"He called here, Ber. I just hung up, not ten minutes ago. I told him to try your cell."

I panicked and began a futile search for my phone. *Now who knows when I'll talk to him*, I thought, as tears collected along the bottom lids of my eyes. I ran like a child to my parents'

room and flung myself on the floral comforter covering their bed. My dad followed, assuring me that Blake would call again tomorrow, saying, “He sounded good, Ber. He said it hasn’t been too hot.”

As I buried my freckled face in a down pillow, my dad asked, “It’s been a while since he called?”

“Two weeks,” I said without lifting my head. “And I was at a stupid *rummage sale*.”

While my dad tried to comfort me, patting my back with the heavy palm of his hand, I braced myself against his good intentions and felt my body bounce like a stiff board against the mattress.

* * *

The only living memory I have of my paternal grandfather is of falling asleep on his lap. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can imagine myself there, snuggled against him. I can hear the steady thump of his heart, his deep, rumbling voice muffled by the muscles and bones of his thick body. I can feel the uncomfortable seam of his dusty denim overalls pressing into my cheek and the reassuring rise and fall of his chest pulling me into sleep as I measure my relaxed respirations against the steady metronome of his heart.

When Blake was in Iraq, I comforted myself by imagining those rhythms of life. I closed my eyes, imagined Blake seated on the couch, and positioned myself there with him, resting my head against his chest or snuggling into his stomach, and I matched my breathing to the memory of his. That sense of connection helped me believe the words Blake had repeated to me at each of our goodbyes: “Everything will be all right.”

When I hear the quick advance of George’s small steps in the night or hear him call, “Mommy,” from the darkness of his room, I recognize the comfort he seeks. So I go to him, even though I know his elbows will jab into my side, his feet will kick away my covers, and the heat from his sleeping body will radiate into my back while I try to sleep. I pull him into the warmth of our bed. I calm him with exaggerated, slow breaths that warm his scalp, with fingers circling his back like bristles on a jazz snare, because I need to hear the sound as much as he does—the sound of breathing through the night.

When I saw Grandpa Cliff’s body in a casket, I was three years old. At the wake, my dad carried me to the front of a room warmed by the bodies of mourners. With me perched in the crook of his arm, my dad paused beside the casket, and I stared down at my Grandpa’s pale face. Unable or unwilling to look him in the eye, I stared resolutely at the place where the lapels of his dark suit met, letting my eyes cross with the fabric, distorting my vision, blurring reality until his chest started to rise and fall, and I wondered, *What is he doing in that box?*

* * *

Sweating, smiling friends and family members packed the Yankton High School auditorium to welcome home the soldiers of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 147th Field Artillery. I sat glued to my husband with my niece on my lap, shyly admiring her heroic uncle. But as the ceremony began, silencing the excited murmur of hundreds of voices, I confronted something I had spent a year trying to avoid: the possibility of soldiers not returning from war. That possibility had become reality for the families of Richard Schild, Daniel Cuka, Allen Kokesh,

and Gregory Wagner. The incongruity of guilt and gladness obscured the happiness and relief around me.

Overwhelmed by the radiating heat of hundreds of bodies, the eager stares of strangers, the flashing of cameras, I allowed my thoughts to follow beads of sweat as they slid, one by one, from the base of my hair down the back of my neck, picking up speed as they passed between my shoulder blades and traveled the rest of the way along my spine. I stared through a lens of tears at the row of folding chairs in front of me, following the dark seam of metal that curved along a frame, sweeping my eyes across a flat bronze surface interrupted by uneven flecks of black then down an angled leg to the floor. There I noticed the contrast between the faded denim that folded over the gleaming black heels the woman in front of me wore and the crisp uniform that jutted from her husband's tattered, tightly-laced Army boots. I remembered the boots displayed outside—slouching, wrinkled suede with loose laces spiraling down into a heap—next to the pictures of four fallen soldiers.

As my chin dropped toward my chest, I let my head fall towards my husband. My eyes lingered on the eyeleted bottom half of his bootlaces before moving over the hooked upper half, past folds of camouflage to the taught fabric that pulled across his knee, and finally to the crisp seams of cargo pockets bulging from his thigh. Then my eyes came into focus as I noticed George—cheeks red, mouth relaxed, eyelids heavy—slouched unquestioningly into his father. While I watched Blake stroke the side of his cleanly shaven chin against the hot, damp, hair of his sleeping son, a relieved sigh relaxed my shoulders and rounded my back. I closed my eyes and leaned into Blake, fitting my head into the hollow crook of his neck.

Framing our Family

A week after the homecoming, Blake, George, and I joined Blake's family for Sunday dinner at his Grandma Marilyn's house. The welcome home signs his cousins had made the week before still hung over the lace curtains in the kitchen, and I still sat as close to Blake as I could, absorbing the comfort of his body beside me. Even as we filled our plates with mashed potatoes and gravy, homegrown carrots, and roast beef, I slid my chair closer to Blake's. As we ate, Marilyn asked whether or not we'd seen last week's edition of the *Argus Leader*. "There's a nice picture of Blake and George inside," she said. "I'll give you a copy if you haven't got one already." She pushed her chair back from the table, interrupting her dinner to pull a folded copy of the newspaper from the top of the fridge. "It's inside, page seven or eight," she said as she handed it to me.

As I peeled back thin layers of newsprint and glanced at the images—a woman's arms and legs wrapped around her soldier, a soldier grinning and tousling the hair of a teenage child—it took me a moment to even recognize my husband. In that Sunday edition, out of the context of our lives, Blake could have been a teenager: his ear appeared oversized against clean-cut hair and narrow, close-shaven face. I wouldn't have recognized him if not for the smile—the chin drawn in, cheeks pulled into deep dimples. A flag's red and white stripes and cluster of stars spiraled across George's face in the photo, almost covering his lips, which were frozen in the beginning of a smile or shaping of a word. His fingers spiraled into loose fists, and he rubbed his squinted eyes with the backs of his chubby hands.

With little of his face, bald head, and miniature frame visible, George's age would have been hard to gauge to anyone who didn't know him, know his family. He could have been two

or three, old enough to have spent the year asking, “Where’s Daddy?” He could have been old enough to have learned from the answers that the flags streaming around him held significance, that men in camouflage were important somehow. He could have been old enough to know that the man holding him was his dad, old enough to recognize that a year without someone was a long time. Old enough to say, “Daddy’s home.” He could have been crying out of relief.

But he wasn’t. I remembered the moment. I knew he was just tired.

As I studied the image, I remembered the reporter who spoke to me that day before the busses arrived. Now I understood the story she’d been after.

I had been staring at the highway, my eyes following winding cracks filled with black tar beyond the city limits of Yankton, imagining my husband and the rest of Charlie Battery rolling over the interstate, closer to home, when the journalist approached me. Her hot pink lips spread into a smile as she strode through the crowd of soldiers’ friends and family that had gathered in the parking lot outside the Yankton Armory. I didn’t see her camera or her credentials, but she approached confidently, her teased hair raising and lowering as she asked, “So who are we welcoming home today?”

“My husband,” I answered, pulling up George’s slouching tube socks.

Without asking my name, she began scribbling in her notepad. “Your husband. That’s great. And the father of . . . ?”

“The father of George,” I said, straightening his overalls and kissing his sun-warm forehead.

“And this beautiful girl?” she asked, leaning toward Cami, who pulled back and hid behind my leg.

I tousled Cami’s high, pony tail, which sparkled with metallic blue stars and red ribbons, and said, “No, not this one. This is my niece.”

As the reporter’s eyebrows raised, so did the airy, curled mass of her hair. She looked at me as if I’d misunderstood. “And her name is . . . ?”

“Cami. Camille Stevenson.”

Pencil scratching, eyes back on her notepad, the woman asked, “and your husband?”

“Blake.” When she glanced up from her notepad I realized she needed more. “Blake Jensen.”

“That’s great,” she said. “And what is his rank?”

Having never learned military abbreviations or ranks, I hated that question. I froze. *He got that promotion, some new title . . . E-something-or-other . . .* The reporter squinted at me, urging me on. “Your husband . . . what is his rank?”

Brock was standing close enough to hear her question and jumped in to save me. “Staff Sergeant, E-6.” Brock told the journalist. Then, as if he hadn’t noticed the awkward moment, he directed his attention at George. “Sergeant Jensen. What a clown. Your dad is such a clown.”

The reporter thanked me and dismissed herself. That was all she needed to know.

I had forgotten about the journalist until I saw the photo, until I saw my family through her lens: George’s fists wiping away imaginary tears. At first, I resented the representation, the

way our family looked from the outside—like the military family described in the caption, “Staff Sergeant Jensen and his eleven month old son, George.” But when I took the newspaper home and slipped it between sheets of George’s scrapbook, the pages I had already decorated with photos, red-white-and-blue stickers, and hand-printed captions, I realized that much like the reporter framed her own story that day, I had done the same.

I had my own favorite photo from the day of the homecoming. In my photo, a blonde woman rests against a man on the left side of the frame. She stands just in front of him so that as she leans her head on his shoulder, she also reclines against his chest. Sun rays converge along the curve of her chin, highlighting the enamel of her teeth, the point of her nose, the smile that lifts her cheeks. Her happiness is sharply defined, a focal point of the photo. The man receives slightly less of that sun—his face is shadowed, his grin nearly swallowed up by black—but the light glides across his smooth forehead, glows around his silver rims and along his rounded nose and full lips. The light doesn’t forget him, but his presence, his happiness, is quieter somehow. The smile that pulls his chin in and wrinkles his eyes hovers above the off-center part of the woman’s hair, which sweeps down along the left side of her face, casting her smile in flecks of gold.

I like how the man and the woman in the photo both admire the earnest-faced child who, perched on the woman’s hip, fills the right side of the frame. The boy’s shirt gleams, white. His dark eyes, directed at the camera, narrow under a furrowed brow. His soft, turned up nose, his heavy cheeks and plump lips glow, absorbing the camera’s faint flash of artificial light, while natural light from over his shoulder creates a halo of thin, blonde hair to top his full face.

The composition seems balanced: two adults squeezed together on the left offsetting the child centered on the right. The moment captured is warm and bright against a blurred

background of two crew-cut men, the dark windows of a passenger bus. The foreground asserts a simple truth: proud parents, tired child, happy family.

But I edited the photo to make it seem that way—cropped out the faces of other soldiers, cut out the noise of other friends and family. The event was a homecoming for the surviving members of the 147th. It was a celebration of soldier-heroes, a demonstration of support, patriotism, and pride, but my favorite photo is one with no flags streaming, no red, white, and blue balloons. In my photo, these symbols have faded, given way to my own center of interest: my family. An image of simplicity.

But I know it is only an image. A story that I have created. Because when I examine the photo closely, I know that the clean-cut men whose dark sunglasses blur into the tinted windows and color streaked sides of a passenger bus are soldiers of Charley Battery. I know the stiff collar around Blake's neck is his Army uniform, not a dress shirt loosened at the end of the work day, tie removed, like it seems it could be. I know that as the photo was taken, I bounced with nervous excitement. As I leaned into Blake's shoulder, I let myself experience the relief, the displacement of weight, but I also realized Blake was coming home to a completely different life than the one he had left. We'd been married for six weeks before he left, and we'd spent those six weeks in Bryant with both of our families; he returned to an almost one-year-old son and a home he'd never seen. In his thirteen months away, I had transformed from a girlfriend into a wife and mother; I had no idea how war might have transformed him. Just before the photo was taken, as I waited for Blake's bus to arrive, I'd been thinking of the pamphlet I'd received in the mail from the Family Readiness Group that stressed the importance of giving soldiers time and space to readjust to civilian life. I had reminded myself not to weigh him down with diaper changing, dish-washing, bill-paying, and the rest of daily life. But the same pamphlet had

explained that soldiers can also easily feel left out after returning home—like their role has been filled and they are not needed in the family—so I reminded myself to invite him in. I stood in that parking lot hoping that all the time George spent with my dad, Blake’s dad, and Blake’s brothers would have prepared him to welcome another deep-voiced man into his life, but part of me worried that he might reject his own father, or at least be leery of him. So I had bounced George on my hip, whispering to him in excitement, “Daddy will be here any minute,” trying to keep my voice from trembling. I wanted the excitement to show, but not the nerves. I wanted the reunion to be simple, but I knew the future held a lot of adaptation and adjustment. I wished that Blake could step off the bus and our lives could pick up where they left off, but of course that was an impossibility—we had both witnessed life-changing events, life and death.

My favorite photo simplified these things. The thoughts that rattled in my mind are not recorded in the image. Maybe they did flee for the moment when Blake wrapped his arm around my waist, but the simplicity is still a façade, the result of cropping. The image was everything that I wanted to remember—the beginning of our family life, our first real family photo, smiles and sun kissed hair—so I blew it up and pasted it in George’s scrapbook.

The scrapbook contains 184 pictures of George. The first was taken six weeks before Blake left for his tour of duty—it is the fuzzy, black-and-white profile printed at our twenty-week ultrasound, when we learned we were having a baby boy. One night before Blake left, while he was watching TV, I carefully cut and glued three layers of black, grey, and blue paper to frame that ultrasound picture, centered it on a 10”x10” page above the letters G E O R G E.

When I finished, I realized how much I liked the way the name looked on the page. At the time, Blake and I were still discussing possibilities for the baby's name, so when I tucked that page into the faux-leather bound baby book and handed it to Blake, it was my way of saying, "You win. We'll name him George." When I cut a copy of the ultrasound image into a small rectangle and slid it into a protective, plastic pocket in Blake's wallet, it was my way of reminding him, *You may be a soldier, but you're also a husband and will soon be a dad.*

While Blake was in Iraq I carefully documented the first year of George's life in his scrapbook: George in his lion costume, George in the arms of his aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, and cousins, George lifting his head, smiling, and crawling for the first time—many of the same pictures I'd sent to Blake. I framed the photos in fancy paper, secured them with brads, and embellished them with stickers. The photos create a timeline of moments leading up to Christmas, when Blake came home on leave. Next comes an outline of the nine months before between Christmas and Blake's welcome home. Messy-faced George eating spaghetti; puppy-George crawling with books and toys dangling from his mouth; George wedged between a nightstand and a bed; George standing next to couches and tables; George grinning from inside Grandma's toy box. Next comes my favorite picture and others from Blake's welcome home, then the first birthday that followed a couple weeks later.

Out of 184 pictures that made the scrapbook of George's first year of life, 16 show George and Blake together. 8.7 percent. I actually counted, because it occurred to me that I may have over-represented Blake's presence in that first year of life. I did the math. They spent four and a half weeks together in that first year. 8.7 percent.

And yet, the scrapbook doesn't tell the whole story. It displays images recorded by a lens, light redirected, isolated from context. Photographs sometimes make objects smaller or

larger than we would otherwise recall, and maybe that's good. In my memory of that year, Blake's absence is immense, but in the scrapbook, he doesn't seem to be missing at all. The pictures are frozen frames, still shots in a story that continues to unfold.

Transitory Home

He's home. He's finally home.

The words quivered on my lips, coaxing a smile across my face even before I opened my eyes each morning. This ritual repeated itself for weeks after Blake's return. I had chanted the words inside my head as we waited for a bus to bring Blake home. I had whispered the words over and over to George as I scanned the crowd of soldiers and family members for Blake's face. I hugged the words in the coils of my vocal chords as we drove to Bryant with Blake's brothers and dad, squeezing his hand as if to confirm the reality. I repeated the words when we finally made it to our new home in Brookings the next day, when it felt as though our family was complete for the first time. And for many mornings afterwards.

Each morning, I studied Blake's profile for a moment, curling into him and tucking my arm over the smooth, warm skin of his abdomen, before I stood and snuck to George's room, where I wrapped George in his favorite blue satin blanket and lay him against my shoulder. I kissed his fringe of hair as I made my way back to our bedroom, and then when I had placed George on the mattress, I snuggled in beside him, resting my cheek against his forehead as I reached over to place my hand on his dad's hip. I closed my eyes and repeated the words, as if to remind myself that it wasn't a dream. *He's home.*

But we weren't home, really. It was all still too new. It didn't feel comfortable and lived in like a home does.

Our home was a duplex that Blake saw for the first time late at night, when he unbuckled George from his car seat and carried him to the backdoor, where I explained that he would have to swing the hinge-style doorknob up, not down as he would on a normal door. He laughed as I

explained how his younger brother, Brad, had removed the doorknob in order to fit our washing machine in on moving day, how he put the doorknob back on upside down.

Blake had read about the duplex in letters and heard about it in phone calls, but he'd never seen the place I'd rented and moved into two months before. He had a lot to learn about the places he should not step, like the creaky spot in the wood floor, the ceramic tile on the steps that had come loose shortly after we moved in. He had to learn all the routines that had been established inside, like the bath, the series of three books, and the back scratching that led up to George's bedtime.

The routines of our family were completely foreign to Blake. After our wedding day, Blake and I had barely lived together, so we had hardly even established a couple's routine, much less a family routine. On our wedding night, after the reception and dance, I took off my heels and bunched ivory satin up around my knees as we walked over worn sidewalks from the auditorium where our friends and relatives still celebrated to the empty, seventies ranch that would someday be my aunt and uncle's retirement home. For the next six weeks, the blue three-bedroom would be our honeymoon suite. A temporary resting place.

There we had been squatters, almost, with no furniture of our own, just the bed, the dining room table, and the awkward low-backed couch that kept us sitting in strained positions—either sitting at attention, neck erect, or forcing our heads back to meet the wall, as if we were backing away from someone or something. The only possessions we brought to the house were a few clothes and the patchwork bedspread my mom had sewn in rich textures and patterns of gold and placed on the bed the day of our wedding so that at least when we walked in the room, it would feel a little like our own.

During those six weeks of marriage, our temporary routine had included baseball games, lunches and suppers of ramen noodles and grilled cheese, and long drives during the day to “wrangle trees”—a hobby of Blake’s that involved driving around, scanning ditches for small, self-sewn Spruce, Pine, and Cottonwood trees that could be easily dug up and transplanted into the shelterbelts that lined his dad’s farmland. We tried to establish roots of our own, driving across the state in my black Ford Ranger on a makeshift honeymoon. The tiny truck had no air conditioning, and when the heat became overwhelming, Blake would remind me, “The pioneers did it, Amber. Covered wagons didn’t have air conditioning.” It was funny the first time or two, but grew old as we made our way from the Cosmos to Mount Rushmore, to Crazy Horse Monument, and the Presidential Wax Museum. Our honeymoon was more like a 5th grade field trip than a romantic getaway, but we laughed all the way home about Blake’s determination to cast his vote for George W. Bush in the jammed ballot box at the wax museum. Even though I was six months pregnant, those six weeks felt like the ten years preceding them; life didn’t begin to change significantly until Blake was gone.

And once Blake returned, once we had the chance to start our family life together, we invited another change into our lives even before we gave ourselves the chance to adapt to life as a family. We invited Brock to live with us.

So the duplex Blake had read about was still a transitory home, a place where we would slowly adjust to life as a family. Brock was part of the transition. A relief, of sorts. We joked about our living situation—George’s weird uncle who lived in the basement, the bar-certified lawyer who was living, rent free, in a cinderblock basement with turf-quality carpet, the irony of such an educated and employable man living in the basement while his unemployed, veteran

husband and graduate-student sister-in-law paid the rent on the meager salary of a Graduate Teaching Assistant.

Brock had been a best friend to both Blake and I for most of our lives. He understood us, and he understood what it meant to readjust to civilian life after a deployment. After his own return from Iraq two years earlier, Brock had been driving down the highway when he spotted movement in the ditch. Without the movement ever really registering in his mind, he found himself screeching to a halt at the side of the road, the back wheels of his truck edging into the ditch as he scanned the road but before he realized the pounding in his chest. He'd traveled thousands of miles of roads in Iraq, accompanying convoys. He'd been trained to notice small movements, things only slightly out of the ordinary. His reaction was perfectly reasonable in a war zone, highly unexpected as he traveled a quiet South Dakota highway, but comforting to me, because it meant that he could relate to any unexpected reactions Blake might have to what seemed like everyday life to me. I felt a sense of security, believing that Brock might provide a bridge between the military and civilian sides of Blake's life, the past and future of our family. But at the same time, I felt like we were avoiding our own independence, delaying our transition into a single family unit.

Almost every night, Brock joined us for supper, and helped with the dishes afterwards. After George went to bed, Brock would come up for study breaks. He helped set the rhythm of small talk, gave us something to focus on outside of our small, slowly transitioning family. Blake didn't have a job yet, so the only subjects we had to comment on were George's behavior, my graduate studies. Brock brought a bit of variety. And a bit of security. A distraction from all the newness, and a tie to the familiar life we were building on. When Brock was around, we had more to think about than the changes we were undergoing as a couple: Blake came home

from Iraq slimmer, but he came home to a wife who still carried a few extra pounds from pregnancy. He came home to a walking, talking son. To the permanent responsibilities of family that I'd had a year to adjust to.

Blake had also come home expecting the slow mornings he'd left behind—sleeping until he was ready to wake up, not waking to the cry of a one-year-old, or to the responsibility of pouring cereal for breakfast. Our morning bed was comfortable and quiet. Sheets warm with sleep. Smooth skin and slow breathing. But stagnant, too, the slept-in air almost suffocating. Because as Blake slept in, I wanted to spring to my feet, crack a window, let fresh morning air in. I wanted the day—the future—to begin.

Each morning, after the initial family time spent cuddling together in our bed, George's eyes eventually fluttered open, and then I swept him up in my arms and carried him to the living room, where we proceeded with our morning routine of books and Wheat Chex followed by cartoons on Public TV. I wanted Blake to join in on the routine, but at the same time wanted to let him sleep. I wanted to make him breakfast or coffee, but knew he wasn't a breakfast or coffee guy. I wanted to do something, make the morning momentous, somehow, but knew it wasn't necessary, that it might be better, even, to let the morning be as normal as it could be.

When it was time for me to dress for work, I perched George on the mattress next to Blake, smiling as George snuggled in next to his dad without seeming to wonder who this man was taking up space on the bed. Everything seemed natural. Nothing out of the ordinary, except maybe the modesty that led me to turn away from Blake as I dressed. Strange that I would be the one noticing something out of the ordinary.

When George and I made our way back into the living room, Blake followed, grabbing the remote and slipping right into his old habit of channel surfing.

“So, I have class in an hour or so,” I explained. “I’ve gotta get going pretty soon.” Blake was probably nodding in acknowledgment when I asked, “Do you want George to stay home with you? Or should he go to daycare?”

“Why don’t you take him in. For a while, at least.”

When Blake came home, we had agreed that there was no hurry for him to go back to work. He deserved some time off, we had some money in savings, so he could take his time and ease back into civilian life. But I had assumed he would be anxious to jump into the role of parenting, so each time he suggested that George go to daycare instead of staying home with him, I tried to hide my disappointment. But I pulled George closer to me, as if shielding him from some form of rejection. “Okay,” I said, hesitating. “But I’ll just go teach my classes and come back. Just a few hours, really.” I didn’t want to push, but I wished Blake would reconsider.

I started to wonder if I’d taken the advice in those Family Readiness pamphlets a bit too far—that by trying so hard to give Blake space, I’d given him the impression that he had no responsibility. I remembered that the photocopied papers, printed on shades of blue and green, also said soldiers needed to feel a sense of purpose, that often wives assume all the responsibilities while a soldier is gone—yard work, housework, bill paying, putting kids to bed—but that soldiers need to take back some of those responsibilities, feel they are needed.

I offered once more. “You’re sure you don’t wanna just keep him home?”

“Not today,” he said. “Tomorrow, maybe.”

I left for work feeling deflated, but reminding myself that George going to daycare was no big deal. It was his routine. *Maybe George needs the consistency, Blake needs the time and space to rest, to think.*

And it *was* fine. When George and I came home in the afternoon, the two of them played with blocks and read books. We ate supper together and followed supper with George's bath and bedtime routine. No one's life seemed disrupted. The next day, Blake kept his promise, and while I taught at the university, he and George had lunch with Brock, then spent the afternoon napping and watching TV. When I returned from my evening class, Blake admitted that he had skipped George's bath. "I wasn't sure if I was getting the water too hot, or too cold, so I just put his pajamas on and put him to sleep." The next night, Blake stepped into the bathroom to feel the water temperature, and that was enough to give him confidence to tackle the next bath on his own.

I began to relax.

And over the next few months, we took it day by day. Blake put off changing a diaper for as long as he possibly could, but eventually he even assumed that responsibility. Some days Blake wanted to go hunting, hang out with his dad and do farm work, or just relax around the house, so George went to daycare. Other days he stayed home, and the two of them played. Soon the only sign of Blake resisting parenthood was his disdain for walks. "George and I are going for a little walk. Wanna come?" I would ask.

"Where are you walking to?"

"Nowhere, just walking. Down the street."

Most of the time Blake declined, and when he did agree, he seemed uncomfortable and ready to get home as quickly as possible.

In the evening, we would invite Brock up from the basement bedroom where he studied to have supper with us. After eating, the three of us chatted while Brock washed dishes, I wiped the table or swept the floor, and Blake started George's bath. When Blake and I decided to join a bowling league, Brock was our built-in babysitter. But most nights, after George was asleep, Blake and I shared the space of the living room—me studying or grading papers, him watching TV. When I finished my work, I would join Blake on the couch, resting my head on his lap until I fell asleep. When he'd had enough Comedy Central, HGTV, Food Network, and History Channel for the night, he'd wake me, and we'd make our way to bed. At sometime during the night, we would hear George call out, "Mommy," hear the drumming of his feet. We woke every morning together. The three of us. We had a routine.

And by the time snow thawed in spring, Blake had even changed his attitude towards walking. Suddenly, he was the one suggesting walks in the evening. He pushed the stroller and suggested new walking routes, new parks to play at. As we walked, we analyzed homes for their family friendliness and guessed their prices—maybe we'd been watching too much HGTV—and sometimes at home I would log onto a realtor's website to check our price-guessing skills, see who'd come the closest. We weren't home, yet, but we were beginning to dream about the future, about a home that would be more permanent than temporary.

A New Way of Seeing

On the way into the convention center for an Army-sponsored, post-deployment, re-integration Family Retreat, Blake reminded me, “This is gonna be ridiculous. I hate these Army things.” He had been home for a few months, and this was the first time he was reporting back to the Army for anything.

It was cold outside, the weather having taken a drastic turn since the hot September Sunday when Blake returned home. I quickened my step and zipped the collar of my down coat up to my neck, then tucked my gloved hand around Blake’s arm. “It can’t be that bad,” I assured him, even though the only experience I had with Army events consisted of an activation ceremony, a send-off, and a welcome home. I should have known that Blake was right, but I was actually looking forward to the Army-sponsored family weekend.

Blake had been home for a month or two, and I had spent those weeks watching Blake assimilate into civilian life almost seamlessly. He was a natural father, and George seemed drawn to him, as if he had known all through that first year of his life that he had a dad who would be coming home. Blake fit in perfectly. I was the one on the outside: the Army wife who didn’t understand military hierarchy or acronyms, the veteran’s wife who had no more idea about what her husband had seen, heard, or done in Baghdad than to say that he trained Iraqi policemen. But I knew that members of Blake’s unit had died, that he had held the light for a medic as he worked on an IP with a hole in his gut. So I wondered if Blake was struggling with something internally. There was more to his military service than I knew, and I thought I needed more insider knowledge if I was going to be a supportive wife. I hoped a weekend immersed in military culture would help me catch on.

But I had other hopes for the weekend, too. Blake and I had spent so little time together, so little time as a couple, we'd never established any friendships with other husbands and wives. Of our sixteen months of married life, Blake had spent 14 as an active duty soldier. I thought a weekend with other soldiers and soldiers' wives might link military and married life. Maybe we'd become friends—these men who had served together in Iraq and wives who had endured a year of single life—and arrange double dates, share stories about the strain of long-distance relationships, the relief of being together again.

But when we entered the convention center, we were greeted by a string of tables clothed in navy blue, stainless steel serving plates filled with muffins and covered dishes filled with breakfast meats and scrambled eggs. The hallway was quiet. The only sign of people was the buzz of voices from a room half way down the long corridor.

“I guess we should get some food,” Blake said, directing me toward the service line.

We filled our plates and made our way to the room that hummed with voices and occasional bursts of laughter. As we entered, Blake scanned the white-clothed round tables, but before we could sit, a chubby-faced kid approached us, almost shouting, “Jensen!” and slapping Blake on the back. “So this is the wife? Aren't you gonna introduce me, Jensen?”

Blake laughed. “Yeah. Amber, this is Bryce. My gunner.”

I smiled but said nothing, wondering what exactly a gunner was. Someone who held a gun, obviously, but I figured they had all been armed at all times. Blake reference to Bryce as *his* gunner implied some subordination, and I knew Blake had been promoted, but I didn't understand that relationship between these two young men.

As Bryce reached for my hand, he broke the silence. “Yeah, Jensen here had to put up with my shit the whole time. And I had to put up with him ordering me around. Your husband

can be a real asshole.” His friendliness put me at ease, but the fact that he knew more about the last year of my husband’s life than I did kept me on edge. Bryce wasn’t the type of soldier I’d imagined meeting; I quickly pegged him as someone more likely to share stories of drunken one night stands than witty conversation over dinner with a married couple like Blake and I. So my discomfort grew as my hopes of connecting with another military couple began to fade.

After our handshake, Bryce continued. “How about the kid? How’s George doing?” Blake probably told him that George was great, probably mentioned something about his perfectly round, bald head, which was the feature he liked most to describe, but instead of turning the conversation back to Bryce, Blake said, “Well, we’re gonna grab a seat. It’s good to see you Bryce. We’ll probably catch up with you later.”

Bryce slapped Blake on the back. “That’s Jensen. All business-as-usual.” He grinned and said, “We’ll see you around.”

As he turned, Bryce was already shouting another soldier’s name and reaching his hand out for another greeting. Blake shook his head and smiled. “Ah, Bryce.”

“Is he one of your buddies?” I asked, reviving my original intention of piecing together names and faces, assembling some sense of understanding.

“Yeah, I guess so. He was the only guy that was with me the whole time. The rest of us got moved around, but Bryce was always in my truck. A good kid, but just a pup, really.” Blake laughed. “Man, sometimes I wanted to wring his neck. But he’s a good kid.”

I laughed, too, now imagining Blake as a father-figure, or a big brother at least, to this boisterous kid. It wasn’t that it seemed out of character—Blake was a calm, understanding guy who could be firm with people when he needed to—but I wasn’t used to picturing Blake in a position of authority. I still pictured Blake as the teenager behind the ticket counter at the movie

theater, the kid mowing lawn at the local nursing home, the son driving tractor during planting season, the shy boyfriend who ruffled a brown paper bag containing a wedding ring and said, “I have something for you.” But already, five minutes into the family weekend, I was beginning to re-imagine him.

“There’s Surna,” he said. “Let’s sit by him.” Blake settled his plate across from a dark haired guy with a broad, gentle smile. “Hey, Grant. How’s it going?” I took the first name exchange as a sign of more intimate friendship.

“Not bad, Blake. And you? You brought the wife, but where’s the kid?”

“We left him with Amber’s cousin,” Blake said, before pausing to introduce me. “We might bring him tomorrow. I just didn’t know what this would be like.”

“Ridiculous, I’m sure,” Surna answered. “If I were you I’d bring the kid just to have an excuse to get outta here.”

“Yeah, but leaving him’s a pretty good excuse, too, right?” Blake rehearsed his exit-strategy, “Sorry, sir, but we gotta go pick up the kid.” Surna laughed as Blake glanced at me and added, “That’s one of the benefits of having a family. You’re done for the night and don’t wanna get stupid drunk, you say, ‘I gotta get home to the kid.’ Anything I want to get out of, I just say, ‘Amber’s gotta study, I’ve gotta stay home with George.’”

I raised my eyebrows, “He catches on quick, doesn’t he?”

“That’s Jensen, all right. Catches on quick.” Surna lifted his chin in Blake’s direction. “So’s that why you didn’t come up last night? I didn’t see you at the bar.”

“Yeah, well, we just live in Brookings,” Blake explained. “Close enough that we could drive up this morning. How was it? A pretty good time?”

“You know, same old shit. Some guys got pretty wasted. I drank too much. You didn’t miss too much. I’m sure you’ll catch up tonight.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. We’ll probably go home,” Blake said. “I’m not planning to stay for everything. Maybe slip outta here after a while. You know, gotta go get the kid.”

We all knew George wasn’t really the reason Blake and I were leaving, but I wondered what the real reason was. I was afraid Blake was avoiding something.

Before I could think too much about my fears and questions, though, our breakfast with Surna was interrupted by an announcement—“Let’s everybody move to the chairs on the west side of the room so we can get started with our first session.” Like good military men and military wives, we followed orders.

Blake and I settled into the back row of chairs, and after a quick introduction, we were watching a video about re-integration and some of the challenges soldiers returning from war can face. I’m sure the video contained facts and statistics, began with a man in uniform speaking resolutely about the fact that soldiers don’t have to suffer on their own, that their families and their chain of command are available and willing to help with re-integration. Those facts would have sounded familiar from the family readiness pamphlets that had come to me in the mail. I was prepared to hear the information, and I was prepared for the infomercial format of it all—the unprofessional acting and over-dramatization of daytime soap operas. A soldier drinking beer in front of the television while a toddler played on the opposite side of a mountain of silver cans. A pre-teen son bounding in the door after school with news about acing a test at school, his father staring blankly back at him before standing up, retreating to his bedroom and shutting the door. Another soldier fighting with his wife over bill-paying and the pressure to provide for his family. A younger soldier arguing with his parents when they asked him about when he was going to get

a job. Another young soldier staggering into an auditorium full of people with a gun tucked into his jacket.

What I wasn't prepared for was the reaction of people around me. Snickers as a child cried. Giggles as actors yelled and stomped feet. Uproarious laughter as gun shots echoed at the end of a scene.

The whole thing—the video and the people's reactions—seemed more to make fun of the problems soldiers might face than to portray them in a meaningful, thoughtful way. The whole thing seemed to mock me and my fears, which weren't as extreme as those represented on screen, but which were real. What if Blake *isn't* ready to go to work when we start running out of money? What if he *does* start drinking more than he should? What if he *does* cope by retreating rather than getting involved in family life? The video, and the soldiers' reactions to it, made me more certain than ever that Blake would never tell me or anyone else if he was having trouble adjusting to civilian life.

During the pep talk that followed—"We're here to help" and "The worst thing you can do is keep it to yourself"—I felt hopeless. I was relieved when the session ended with the news that we'd have a fifteen minute break before the next session. I couldn't imagine what would come next. As soon as we stood, Blake was cupping my elbow in his palm, pulling me out of the conference room and towards a the bathroom at the end of the hall, and saying, "When I come out, let's get outta here." I nodded mechanically, still in a daze, not knowing what to make of the video I'd just seen. While Blake was inside, I reassured myself, *Blake wasn't laughing. He knows that he can talk to somebody if he needs to. And anyway, he's been playing with George and spending his time hunting. He's easing into things, but he's doing fine.*

By the time Blake came out of the bathroom, I had changed my mind about the family weekend. I was ready to retreat. I'd forgotten my original idealization of new understanding, new connections, and I'd begun to understand Blake's reluctance. It was nice to meet some of Blake's army buddies, and it was nice to see Blake function, even informally, in his Army capacity, but he was right. The organization, the meetings, the information—the bureaucracy of it all—was a waste of time. When he spun towards the exit, I followed his lead. We walked toward a windowed hallway where light reflected off fall snow in sharp, blinding sheets. I made a conscious effort to walk quickly, but not so quickly that it seemed I was running away. Just quickly enough to look confident, like we knew what we were doing and were supposed to be doing it.

But then, at the entrance to the breezeway that would complete our escape, Blake was greeted by a tall, broad shouldered man who walked hand in hand with a small-framed, attractive woman. They looked like an all-American couple, like he had been a football star and she a varsity cheerleader. I followed Blake's lead, slowing to a stop as we came near the couple.

"This is my wife, Amber," Blake said, turning his shoulders towards me while maintaining eye contact with the dark-blond man.

"Nice to meet you, Amber," the man said with a nod. "How are things going, Blake? Enjoying family life?"

"Yes, I am," Blake answered, a full smile on his face. "And you?"

"Yes, sir," the man answered. "It's good to be home."

The two men looked each other in the eye and smiled, nodding slightly. The way Blake held his gaze surprised me. I thought he'd be nervous about being caught mid-escape, but he looked confident, even comfortable. He didn't look like he wanted to escape, anymore. I began

to think Blake was reconsidering his choice to leave the convention center, when I realized neither of the men was speaking anymore. They looked each other in the eye. Blake nodded and exhaled. The tall man nodded in agreement, even though neither of them spoke any words. I tilted my head, listening to this comfortable silence.

Finally, the man spoke again. “So, you sneaking out, here, Jensen, or what?”

“Yeah,” Blake admitted. “But we’ll be back, I’m sure.”

“Hey, no worries, Blake, you do what you gotta do.” The man paused again before dismissing us with the words, “Well, it’s nice to see you. Maybe we’ll run into you later.”

“Yeah, it’s great to see you, too. You take care.”

Blake slid his fingers through mind and squeezed—a signal to move again—but as we made our way down the breezeway, he slowed his pace. When we were at a safe distance, he offered me important information. “That was Schild. Brooks Schild.”

I lifted my chin toward Blake. “He seems like a good guy.”

“The best. Really, you could never meet a nicer guy. One of the strongest men I’ve ever met.”

I pictured the way Schild’s wife held his arm and leaned into him while he spoke, hoping Blake and I looked as secure together from an outsider’s perspective. I hoped for a connection.

“Were you guys close?”

“No, not really,” Blake said. “I mean, we never spent much time together or anything, but he just took care of everybody. He was all about details. He drove his guys crazy over details, but it was all to protect them. I have a lot of respect for him.” He looked straight ahead as he explained. “Schild—Richard Schild—one of the guys who died over there, that was his brother. And when it happened, Brooks came in and told us about it, debriefed us. He didn’t

have to. He could've let somebody else do it. But he held it together. Just kept doing his job, taking care of everybody like he always did.”

I found myself in the familiar position of not knowing what to say. I held myself silent, piecing together what I knew of the story: Blake's phone call, “Some guys were hurt, but I'm okay,” the soldiers' names echoing in the Yankton auditorium at the roll call that ended Charlie Battery's welcome home ceremony. I remembered sitting at the desk in my living room, my eyes pinched tight as I prayed for the families of the soldiers who had died, as I forced myself into darkness until I discovered some sense of stillness and peace and willed that feeling to pass through particles of dust and air, across miles of nothing to the children, spouses, siblings, and parents of these dead men. At the time I'd had no idea that one of the soldiers had a brother, right there with him in Iraq. After meeting Brooks Schild, I regretted not having meditated long enough or prayed hard enough to visualize that peace reaching so far around the world.

As we walked to the car, I tried to see this soldier from Blake's perspective—from the perspective of a young man with two brothers in the military. The strongest man he'd ever met. I remembered Brock, how he described his own nightmares about terrorists cutting his brothers' limbs off. It made sense that Blake would understand and respect Brooks Schild. That they would understand each other.

And as Blake and I climbed into the tan Impala—the family car I'd bought while Blake was in Iraq to replace my black Ford Ranger—I realized that although the day hadn't gone as I'd expected, I was leaving with a new way of seeing. Nothing had changed, really, but Blake sounded different to me. More sure of himself—a staff sergeant who had given orders to his gunner, a mature man who called other grown men kids. A father telling proud stories about his

own son. A soldier who acknowledges loss, looks it straight in the eye without faltering, who shows silent respect.

And as we pulled out of the parking lot and he said, “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a Roast Beef and Cheddar. How about some Arby’s?” The moment was both momentous and almost inconsequential.

Silence

Two years later, Blake and I drove over snow-packed roads to our home in Brookings after a week of family Christmases. George sat behind us, his car seat wedged between a box of clothes, toys, and pajamas still in their packages, tabs of scotch tape and torn wrapping paper still clinging to them, and a basket of dirty clothes. His long lashes hung over his lower lids. His head swayed as we turned corners and slid around curves.

“I’ve been thinking.” I glanced away nervously, then back toward Blake as I continued. “I’m ready to have another baby.”

When an immediate smile spread across Blake’s face, my justification spilled out. “We said we didn’t want our kids to be too far apart. George is already two. It seems like we should at least be thinking about it.”

But then Blake sat, quiet. Early evening dimmed into night, outlining the cement and steel structures of an ethanol plant to our right against a deep gray sky. As the highway widened into four lanes, as we rolled over the last miles of our trip, I began to doubt. “I mean, I know it’s crazy. I’m still in school, I have a thesis to write . . .

Blake interrupted. “Yeah, but It’s one of those things,” he said as we drove into the dark liminal space between two towns. “If you wait for the right time, you’ll probably never do it. There’s always some reason not to.”

I smiled again, glad for his reassurance. “And really, who knows, it will probably take a while.”

Blake’s supportive response, his contained excitement, calmed me. I’d worried that with a two year old son but just over a year of parenthood, Blake would still feel like he was adjusting

to the idea of family life, just getting used to the idea. The Christmases we'd just celebrated were what I considered our first "normal" family Christmas. Our first actual family Christmas—when George was an infant—had been anything but normal, with Blake home on his two week R&R, meeting his son for the first time. Those celebrations were overshadowed by the fact that he would be returning to war after the presents, holiday meals, and a New Year's Day baptism. Our second family Christmas had felt like our first, since Blake had been home only three months. That year, even before we'd settled into any real family routine, we were shopping for gift exchanges and driving back and forth between my parents' house and both of Blake's grandparents' homes for family dinners. This year—our third calendar Christmas—finally felt normal, so I was hesitant to mention the possibility of disrupting what had just become familiar, but Blake sounded more than ready to think about the possibility of another child.

I grinned in the dark passenger seat, still studying Blake's profile for any signs of hesitation. Finding none, I reached across the arm rest and squeezed his hand. "So are we really gonna do this?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I think we are."

Six weeks later, Blake and I were driving down the same highway in the opposite direction, making a trip to my parents' house for the weekend, when I said, "You know how we said we were ready to try? How we thought it might take a while?"

He stole a quick glance at me, then turned back to oncoming traffic as a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah, I remember."

"Well it didn't."

"Seriously?"

“Seriously,” I said. I still couldn’t believe it myself. When I took the pregnancy test earlier that day, Blake was still at work. I didn’t think he needed to be there. I wasn’t expecting a positive result.

“You’re serious? We’re having . . . “

“A baby. Yeah, I’m serious.”

Blake squinted, his head bobbing slightly from side to side as he counted. “So that means, what, November?”

“Pretty good on the fast math, there,” I teased. Blake’s skills in quick calculation had been a long-standing joke ever since a conversation we had while he was in Iraq, when I explained to him that the packages I sent usually took a week to get to him and that I had sent one the day before, which had been a Wednesday. He actually counted out loud, and I could picture his fingers dipping, one at a time as he calculated and finally said, “So it should get here next Wednesday?” “Yes, Blake,” I laughed. “Seven days equals one week, and next Wednesday is one week from this Wednesday.” I smiled at the memory as I corrected his calculation of the due date of our unborn baby. “Nine months from now would be November, but almost four weeks along, so October, probably. We seem to like October.”

“October’s a good month.”

“It is for us,” I said. “But it’s gonna be crazy. You know, there’s no way I can finish my thesis this semester. So, I’ll still be going to school. I don’t know how I can do it.”

“It’ll work out, though. Won’t it? It won’t be that bad.”

“Oh yeah, we can make it work,” I said. Then I added, almost as an after thought, “But let’s not tell anyone. Not yet.” As ready as I felt to have another baby, the reality had hit so

quickly it felt almost overwhelming. “Let’s get used to the idea ourselves before we tell anybody.”

But I didn’t get used to the idea as quickly as I thought I might. My concerns grew over the next month as I sat in our living room, my legs going numb under the weight of my Shakespeare anthology, my eyelids falling shut and my comments trailing off into blue streaks of ink as I sifted through mounds of Freshman Comp essays. When I woke, I worried that I wouldn’t be able to keep up with work, school, and pregnancy. *I’ll never finish my degree*, I thought. But then, I would picture a baby girl with my dark eyes and Blake’s wide grin. If it was a girl, I wondered, would we find a family name as we had for George? If it was a boy, I knew he would be named Louis, after Blake’s paternal great-grandfather, but we’d never seriously discussed names for a girl. As I rocked in the chair, trying to keep myself awake and keep up with my studies and work, my thoughts ricocheted back and forth between excitement and anxiety. This time Blake would be here to experience the whole pregnancy, the experience of holding a new born child. But I would be so busy, and George’s world as only child would be disrupted. I reassured myself, *At least we’re all together. We’re in this together.*

Then, one morning in March, I woke to a wrenching stomach. As Blake dressed for work, I curled up at the end of the bed, clenching my gut. “I thought the morning sickness was over,” I whined to Blake. “Maybe we should both stay home today. Play hookie. Will you stay with me?”

Blake smiled as he zipped his wool dress coat. “I’m sorry, but I better go to work.” He patted my foot as I curled back under the covers. “You’ll be okay, won’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

He switched the light off as he left the room, and I listened to the squeal of the backdoor, the turn of his engine, and the sound of his tires scrunching the fresh snow that had fallen during the night. I lay in bed for a while, but when I couldn't get back to sleep, I decided to work through the discomfort. George was still sleeping, and the snowy sidewalk needed shoveling. But the snow was wet and dense. As I strained against its weight, my back ached, so I excused myself from the work, reasoning that George could wake up at any time.

I shuffled toward the house, and as I reached for the doorknob, I realized it wasn't the weight of the snow, it wasn't concern for George that brought me inside. My abdomen curled in on itself, pulling me down to a crouch. I staggered to the bathroom, boots squealing against tile, and felt the spot of blood seep from me before I made it there.

As strange as it seems, I didn't panic. I maintained a relative sense of calm, reminding myself of something I'd read about spotting being normal early in a pregnancy, something about one pad with slight spotting over several hours being no cause for alarm.

I'm sure George woke up soon after that, and we began our morning ritual of reading and rocking in the living room recliner, but within an hour I knew it wasn't going to be our usual quiet morning. One spot developed into clots of deep red, and my calm dissolved into particles of panic that spread through my body. I called my doctor's office, but by the time they returned my call, I had had to change my blood-stained sweat pants. I knew what was happening. I lined the recliner, already spotted with blood, with a thick, tan towel, covered myself with the pink and blue quilt my grandmother had stitched for my high school graduation. I called Blake.

"Can you come home? Something's wrong . . . I called my sister, she's taking me to the doctor."

His response was simple—"I'll be there soon."

He didn't ask any questions or make me say, *Blake, I'm losing the baby*. He just came. He couldn't have known what was wrong, still, I imagined his eyes following the painted white border of the interstate over hills, around curves, and beyond the horizon, squinting toward a place in the future where everything will be all right, *seeing* that place like he always does, even when I don't believe it exists.

* * *

We spent the afternoon in various exam and waiting rooms, listening to doctors and nurses who tried to give us some hope, but I knew the whole time, even before I got to the clinic, before Blake arrived. By the time the ultrasound tech confirmed with her words—"we can't detect a heartbeat"—I had already begun to move from mourning to acceptance. *Maybe this is best*, I told myself. *Maybe something was wrong with the baby*.

I lay back against a stiff mattress, abdomen exposed, eyes closed. I imagined George sleeping over Blake's shoulder in the waiting room outside, his body ironing wrinkles into his dad's button-up plaid. I summoned the soft static of Blake's fingertips circling the surface of my skin to replace the hospital sheets scratching my lower back, the hot weight of George's sleeping body to protect me from the cold air that poured from a vent overhead. I tried to imagine away the steel and ceramic, machines and measurement, but the slather of thick gel, the shocking cold of plastic, and the smell of sterilization grounded me there. Eventually, the even voice of an ultrasound technician, barely audible above the hum and click of technology, commanded my attention. "The fetus stopped growing at about five weeks."

Five weeks. I inhaled the reality, felt it echo in a hollow space at the base of my throat.

I heard the crackling static of the black and white monitor to my right and couldn't help but look. Its glow reminded me of my first ultrasound and the pixelated image of George's fingers flexing across the screen, but this time I saw no hope, no miracle there. Only fuzzy, grey flecks spitting shadows.

When I was pregnant with George, the first ultrasound was at twenty weeks. It was a somewhat solemn occasion, too, because we knew Blake would be leaving for Iraq before the baby was born, and Blake's insistence on every type of test the hospital offered in the first trimester seemed to me his way of leaving with some sense of certainty and security. But the ultrasound had also been full of hope. When the nurse asked whether or not we wanted to know the sex of the baby, Blake and I both nodded silently. She had grinned and said, "That's good because he seems to want you to know. Sometimes we have to really look to be sure, but you see right there?" She clicked to create an arrow on the screen. "It's a boy." I looked at Blake, who leaned against a counter beside the thin mattress I lay on. He smiled, but appeared calm. I had no idea until that evening when he shared the news with his brothers just how excited he was. "I almost passed out," he told Brock. "The room was hot enough to begin with, and then they said it was a boy, and I almost fell over. I had to sit down."

I had been nervous during my first pregnancy, worrying about the baby's health and development, and what I considered normal fears were at times amplified and at other times overshadowed by my fears about Blake's impending deployment. This second time, I hadn't been as worried about the pregnancy itself as I had been about the life surrounding it—the demands of the life Blake and I had set in place, the work of parenting two children, the studies I had begun. I had been focusing on challenges later on, but not so early. I wasn't prepared for complications. It had happened so easily, it seemed somehow meant to be, like something Blake

and I needed to advance our connection as a family. And maybe I felt, somehow, that I was letting him down. That after all we had been through, this wasn't supposed to be happening.

* * *

When we returned to our house, I was afraid to speak. I didn't know how to explain the combination of sadness and acceptance I was feeling. So I perched in a nest of blankets and pillows, pressed a heating pad into my stomach, and rocked silently. Blake sat on the couch across the room, flipping between adult cartoons, the Food Network, and the History Channel. I stared past him at the white stripes of our vertical blinds, let them blur into the textured white wall they hung against as my eyes lost focus.

I could feel Blake's gaze glance over me, and I knew I wasn't alone, but I couldn't speak. I remembered the helpless expression he wore every time morning sickness sent me running to the bathroom when I was pregnant with George—how he would apologize, I would tell him it wasn't his fault, and he would hug me and say, “Actually, it *kind of* is.” Then, the sense of his disconnected responsibility relieved some of the burden. But as I attempted to make sense of the miscarriage, Blake seemed blameless to me. If anyone was at fault, it had to be me—the woman so worried about teaching and taking classes that she questioned the timing of the pregnancy, the woman who questioned the timing. I told myself that maybe something was wrong with the baby, something beyond my control, that maybe this is just how it had to be. Still, I felt guilty. Maybe I had brought this on somehow, maybe I really had let Blake down.

When Blake asked if I needed anything, I shook my head from side to side and closed my eyes. I appreciated the quiet reminders of his presence, but it was unnerving at the same time.

Until I noticed the silence. The way he read to George in whispered tones. The way he kept the volume on the TV down. He invited me into silence by not asking how I was feeling, not insisting that I need something. His silence suggested the words he'd spoken to me so many times. *Everything will be okay.*

I knew he was right. He had always been right. When he left for Iraq, he whispered those words to me, and as hard as it was to believe him, he had been right. And since he'd come home, our family had thrived in that small rental home. Maybe we hadn't made sense of it all. We'd never had a real conversation about his experiences at war, his transition into fatherhood; in fact, I'd made a conscious effort—reminded myself many times—not to pressure him, not to push or pry. I'd tried to give him a safe place where he could adapt, change, and grow as he needed, without pressuring to name his feelings or explain what he was going through. As I struggled to make sense of the miscarriage, my role, my body's role, and the role of chance and nature, I realized that Blake offered me the same silence. Our living room could contain my movement between acceptance and guilt, comfort and pain. Blake wouldn't press me to name the conflicting feelings. He was happy with conversation or silence. He always had been. When we were dating, sometimes we drove home in the dark with no music playing, silence salted with tight white grains of conversation. "I hate it when people think they have to talk all the time," Blake had said once. "There's something to be said for comfortable silence."

When Blake sat a glass of water on the table beside the recliner, I acknowledged his attention with a blind, one-sided smile. *He seems fine, too*, I told myself. *Everything will be all right.*

When my phone vibrated on the dresser in our bedroom, I ignored it. I knew my mom and sister were probably trying to check on me, but I didn't want to explain anything to anyone. I wanted to remain in my silent sanctuary.

When Blake's phone rang, he stepped into the kitchen to answer. At first I resented the noise, the interruption of the outside world, but as Blake spoke to his boss, I turned my head to listen. His end of the conversation comforted me: "No, actually, she's doing all right. Really good, I think . . . you know, this happens sometimes. That's just the way it is, and really, we'll be fine." I listened as Blake thanked his boss for calling, then flipped his phone shut and slid it onto the kitchen counter before he returned to the living room.

When he returned to the couch, I opened my eyes. I wanted to say, *Thank you for understanding*, but instead I offered him a smile. He flipped through channels, settling on an HGTV home buying show. "Which house do you think they'll go with?" He asked, as the smooth-voiced woman on *House Hunters* review a couple's three choices.

"The second one," I said. "It's got everything they need. Just needs a little remodeling."

Getting Out

“So, I have to ask you for a favor.”

Blake’s voice sounded hesitant, but I shook my head as it tilted skeptically in his direction, signaling that I was listening but that I wasn’t looking forward to his request. I sat in the living room recliner, books tucked around me, fingers perched over laptop keys as I struggled to write a paper about sacred oaths in *Arden of Faversham*.

“Okay,” I said, preparing myself for a request to iron his dress shirt for work the next day. I slowly exhaled the litany of reasons why I shouldn’t have to do it, why I should say no, I reminded myself not to release a gurgling scream of frustration in response.

When he said, “I need you to help me write a letter,” I probably rolled my eyes, because that was another familiar request, and one that I was not in the mood for. Some nights, Blake and I had spent hours trying to fix the logic, grammar, and usage in the letters his boss, Les, drafted. Les had been a military man with an impressive career—thirty years of service in the South Dakota National Guard, and appointment as South Dakota’s adjutant general—and he wrote the same way he spoke: like a motivational speaker. It was a challenge to make the letters sound formal enough for business correspondence without editing out Les’ strong character and voice, and that night, I didn’t feel up to the challenge. I didn’t have time. Even if Blake just wanted help perfecting one of his own letters, which were usually fairly well written but needed some reorganization and smoothing of edges, I didn’t have time. I was under a deadline of my own.

In an attempt to politely deflect his request, I asked, “Can it wait until tomorrow? I’ve got to finish this paper for class tomorrow night.”

“I’d like to get it over with,” Blake said. “I need to write a letter to my commander.” He paused, maybe to see if I had understood. “Asking for release. To get out of the Army.”

After hearing the full request, I knew I couldn’t put the task off. Blake had been talking about getting out of the Army for months, but he’d never made any move toward actually doing it. Brock had talked to me about it, too. He’d said Blake needed to get out of the Army. They had transferred to a new unit, and neither of them was impressed with the structure or leadership. Brock told me there was no way he’d ever go overseas with that bunch of clowns, and he didn’t want Blake too, either. “He either needs to transfer, apply for a full time Army job, or just get out. This unit’s gonna get deployed eventually, and it’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

Of course, I wanted Blake out of the National Guard, too, no longer in danger of being deployed. I had been devastated when Blake told me he’d resigned, committed to the Army for six more years. He was still in Iraq, then, which may have been a good thing since, over the phone, he couldn’t see the look on my face when he said, “So, I need to talk to you about something. I mean, I’ve made up my mind, but I feel like I should talk to you about it first.” His voice was grave. The thought that maybe he wanted a divorce had actually crossed my mind—maybe he’d changed somehow from the dependable man I loved and who I knew had never loved another woman, maybe war had changed him and he just couldn’t handle the idea of family life—so I was actually almost relieved for a moment when he said, “I’m re-upping. Re-signing, with the Army.” But the relief was only momentary. “Re-signing? Does that mean . . .” “Yeah, I’m signing up for another term. Well, two, actually. Six years, then I’ll be close to retirement.” As he spoke, my jaw tightened. *How could he do this to us?* I asked myself, going immediately to George’s crib and slipping him up in my arms. *He doesn’t even know what it’s like, to have a family, to raise a baby alone. And he’s willing to put us through this again? But*

as I listened to his explanation, of how he'd always planned to do this, how he had thought this through and that this way, even though he didn't have a real job at home, yet, he could feel like he was providing for George and I—providing health insurance, at least—I realized that he was right. He had made a decision. It wasn't my decision to make. He'd been home for R&R, had spent two weeks with his infant son, so he'd had at least some taste of fatherhood. He was still there, in a war zone, and if he was still willing to resign, given all those factors, there was nothing I could do about it but be proud of his commitment, even if I resented it and the way it seemed to compromise his commitment to us, his family.

So of course the idea of Blake getting out of the Army was a relief. It was worth the inconvenience of writing my own paper in the middle of the night.

But writing the letter was much more challenging than I'd imagined. Blake wanted everything to sound just right. What I was approaching as a simple resignation letter required, in Blake's eyes, full rhetorical analysis: impeccable word choice, air-tight logic. The argument had to be clear and convincing. I had over simplified the task, relating it to the letters of resignation I had written in the past, necessary documents to be filed in employment files; I hadn't considered that he needed to make an argument.

"They don't have to let me out," he said. "They'd be stupid not to, but they don't have to. Especially not this guy. He's kind of an a-hole."

So we carefully constructed the argument. I tried to put family at the forefront of his reason, Blake resisted. He wanted to be careful to clarify that though his employer was not threatening to deny him advancement in his career because of his commitment to the military, because that really wasn't the case, but he did feel himself that he wouldn't be able to commit fully to his career while in the military. He also felt that his back injury, he wouldn't be a

deployable soldier. “I’d never pass a physical to go back into active duty, and even if I did, I honestly don’t think I could wear the vest again. I just couldn’t handle it. They’d be stupid to send me. And they never would. So why waste my weekends, set myself up to not be successful in my career, and put my family through all the strain of weekend deployments when I’m really no good to the Army anyway?” When I tried to put that in the letter, Blake pulled it out, too.

The only wording I can remember settling on was, “When I resigned for six years while in Iraq, I had not yet experienced family life and had not yet begun my career. I didn’t realize that my military career would interfere with my personal life and my future.” It was true. He’d had no idea. I was glad to hear that he now knew. When we had the words perfected, the letter printed, signed, and sealed in an envelope, we went back upstairs. “Thank you,” Blake said. “Seriously. I couldn’t have done that alone.” He looked down and nodded his head quickly, which was when I realized that it was hard for him. We’d added a line near the end of the letter about how valuable Blake’s military service had been to him, but I didn’t realize the truth of that until his eyes fluttered away from mine. I wanted to tell him, “You don’t have to feel bad,” but before I could, he said, “Well, you have a paper to write, and I better get to bed.” He disappeared into the bedroom.

Re-framing Our Family

Blake and I sat in a small pink room. The mauve walls and chairs seemed appropriate as we prepared for the birth of our baby girl. The past four months had been crazy, with me traveling to Mexico for a month in the middle of my pregnancy to begin taking classes for a Masters of Fine Arts degree, returning home to find a new job—two jobs actually, a part time high school Spanish teaching position and another as an adjunct professor of two sections of composition at a small private university—and then beginning a hectic schedule of family commuting from Brookings to Sioux Falls, where Blake worked, and beginning the process of buying our first home, which we would close on the week after our daughter was born. Sitting in the quiet pre-op room, I felt a sense of calm excitement. The baby we'd been waiting for would be born within a couple hours, and then I would have four weeks off work to enjoy family life and settle in to our new home.

While we waited for the doctor, I teased Blake. “There’s no getting out of this now. The delivery room’s just a few minutes away.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I still say its surgery. A medical procedure. I’m not a surgeon, I’m not supposed to be in there.”

“You’re pathetic,” I told him. “You can run your theory by Dr. Wierda in a couple minutes. I don’t know what you’re so scared of.”

“All I know is my dad had four kids and never went in the delivery room. I bet your dad never did, either. I don’t know why I should have to.”

“It’s just the way things are. Times have changed. Dads get to experience childbirth, too. What, do you want to be like my uncle who dropped my aunt off during a snowstorm and then came back a few days later after the baby was born?”

“If it means I don’t have to be in the delivery room, that’s fine. Nothing wrong with tradition.”

“Ridiculous,” I told him. “There’s nothing wrong with change, either. You’ll be glad once you’re there. And you’ll take pictures. You’re not getting out of that, either.”

“Oh, so now you’re not only gonna make me be there, you’re gonna make me take pictures, too?”

“Yes, I am. You can’t make me do this alone again. No excuses this time.”

“No excuses.”

When Dr. Wierda peeked her head into the room, saying, “Are we ready to have a baby today?” our conversation was over. As she flipped through my chart, I whispered to Blake, “Do you want me to run it by her? Make sure it’s okay for you to be in there?” He shook his head and smiled. Dr. Wierda confirmed, “Everything looks good. Let’s listen to the heartbeat real quick again.” As she searched for the heartbeat, the expression on her face changed. “Well, it sounds like baby’s flipped. She’s head down, now. That must have been uncomfortable for you, mom. When did she flip herself around?”

I shook my head, “I didn’t notice anything. Are you serious? Now her head’s down?”

“Yeah. That could change things. You have a couple options. We can go ahead with the c-section as planned, we could try to induce labor, or you can go home and wait. Do you want to try for a natural birth?”

My mouth hanging open in shock, I tried not to say no immediately, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to go home. I was ready to meet my little girl. I had prepared myself to hold a baby in my arms that day. I had finally decided on her name, and I had scheduled things down to my last class at the university, and I didn't really want to wait any longer. Having had one c-section four years earlier, I wasn't worried about the surgery. I hadn't had any trouble with the recovery, and the idea of going through labor terrified me.

Before I even looked at Blake, I knew what his answer would be. He'd been relieved when we scheduled the c-section. Knowing he couldn't explain his way out of the delivery room, a c-section was his next best option. At least that way the doctor would be in control, and he wouldn't have to pretend to be. I'd seen his reaction when I experienced morning sickness—the way he looked so helpless, like he wanted to do something to make me feel better but didn't know how, like he wished he could vanish into thin air, transplant himself into a tree stand somewhere and seclude himself from this image of me suffering—and could only imagine how he would feel if he had to watch me inhale sharply as contractions hit, clench my teeth as I braced myself against the labor of pushing.

As the doctor waited for a response, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Blake's wide eyes, just as I had expected. I nodded gently at him and turned back to Dr. Wierda. "I don't know. I think maybe we're ready to go ahead with this."

Dr. Wierda nodded. "You don't want to wait. You were expecting today to be baby day," she said. "I understand." I was relieved that she wasn't pushing for a natural birth. "Anyway, since you've had a previous c-section, there's no telling what would happen. We could end up doing a c-section anyway. We'll just go ahead with our original plan, so, the

anesthesiologist will be in soon to bring you down. You'll have the epidural, and within about a half hour, we'll be meeting this little girl."

When the doctor left, I turned to Blake, laughing. "See, she's messing with us even before she's born."

"Yeah," he said. "She's trying to change the game plan on us, but you have to hold firm, make sure she knows who's boss. I told you, Amber, girls are more difficult than boys. George has always been a good boy, a perfect angel, and this one's already giving us a hard time."

"Yeah. Maybe it's stupid, but I had really just prepared myself for the fact that she's gonna be born today. I can't imagine going home without our baby." "It's kinda weird to talk about our daughter like a scheduled appointment, but I guess that's what she is. My students at USF were making fun of me for scheduling my c-section after class." I had chosen an 11:00 am check-in, a c-section scheduled for 12:30, so that I could teach my morning composition class at the University of Sioux Falls, then Blake could pick me up and take me to the hospital. "I don't know what the big deal is, though. I might as well get one more class in before I go on maternity leave. They wouldn't make fun of me if I was in class and my water broke."

"I like it this way better," he said, telling me what I already knew. "No surprises."

I watched him, squirming in boxy, square-armed mauve chair. "No surprises. Can you believe you missed out on this when George was born? Do you ever think about that?" I asked.

"Not really," Blake answered. I thought he had to be lying. Throughout the last three months of this pregnancy, every time I cried, I reminded Blake, "See how much fun you missed out on the first time?" When the baby kicked and rolled around, the point of her feet, knees, or elbows visible along the edges of my round stomach, I pointed it out to Blake. "See, this is what I was trying to describe to you in all those letters and phone calls. Isn't it crazy?" I felt like we

were crossing a new frontier together, bonding in some new way as we experienced this together. But I also worried that once Blake held our newborn daughter he would feel guilty about having missed those moments with George. Maybe he would even experience a closer bond with our daughter and realize that his military service had somehow robbed him of that same connection to his son. But Blake didn't seem worried. "It doesn't seem much different," he would say. "You were plenty emotional before I left for New Jersey, and I saw George kick plenty of times before I left." I told myself that maybe he just didn't want to see the differences, and that was fine with me. I would just appreciate the comfort of having him with me this time.

As we waited for the anesthesiologist to come and take me to the operating room, I reminded Blake. "Here's the camera." I showed him which button turned it on, how to zoom in, how to take a picture. "Don't even try to leave it in here, because you have to take pictures. It's your job. I do the rest of the work, but you have to take the pictures." My husband—the soldier who had handled a year of active duty, a year of war, and then adapted almost seamlessly into a supportive father and doting father—seemed daunted by the idea of birth-day photography. He agreed half-heartedly.

When the anesthesiologist finally came in, the nurse handed Blake his blue smock and pants, mask, hat, and shoe covers. "While they're getting Amber ready, you can slip these on over your clothes. Then someone will bring you down to the operating room. By that time, the epidural should be in place, and things will happen pretty fast." Blake nodded attentively, but the forced smile that pulled his lips into a straight line showed his uneasiness. I squeezed his knee, and said, "I'll see you down there." Then as the nurse wheeled me out of the room, I turned to remind Blake, "The camera. Don't forget the camera."

In the operating room, I noticed the painted walls and eighties, country-blue décor. It wasn't at all how I remembered the operating room. It had seemed so cold the last time—all stainless steel, modern. This seemed sort of quaint, folksy even. Maybe it was just my state of mind, I told myself. I wished Blake could be there with me as the anesthesiologist instructed me to slide towards the edge of the table and hunch my back forward. I hated the idea of a needle slipping into my spine and wished Blake were there beside me. I pictured him dressing in his hospital blues, though, and remembered how hard I tried to imagine him beside me when I was going through these steps for George's delivery. *At least he's here*, I told myself. *He'll be in in just a little bit.*

And he was. The epidural went smoothly, even though I was nervous about it, and soon I was laying back on the table, a blue cloth hung at my waist, and Blake was at my side. He raised his eyebrows, his puffy blue hat and face mask lifting with them. I nodded to him and exhaled. "It's really not that bad."

The nurse helped me assure him. "You can stay right here beside your wife. You don't have to look past the curtain if you don't want to." Then she looked at me. "He's got the camera, too. Don't let him fool you. He tried to leave it behind, but I reminded him."

"Seriously, Blake? You tried to forget the camera?"

"It wasn't on purpose, but, yeah. Well, maybe it was on purpose . . . I . . ."

"It's okay, really," the nurse said. "You are the first nervous father we've had in here."

I look at Blake out of the corner of my eye and shook my head. "You are so pathetic."

"It's true," he said. "I am."

Before we had the chance to say anything else, the routine of checking the feeling in my legs was underway. The anesthesiologist at my feet said, “A little pinch to the foot here, let me know if you feel anything.”

I felt it and nodded. “Yeah, felt that.”

Blake crouched down, closer to me. “I hate this part,” I told him. “You think you can still feel everything when they start, but actually you can’t. It’s terrible, though.” His blue mask fluttered as he sucked in air. I recognized this as a moment of weakness. Nerves displayed by my calm husband, the detached soldier. In spite of my own nervous excitement, I paused to relish his weakness. His vulnerability.

And then, suddenly, the doctor was saying, “All right, let’s get started here.” I studied the ceiling, unable to make eye contact with Blake, who had huddled even closer to me. We were both suddenly helpless, suspended in equal states of uncertainty until Dr. Wierda exclaimed, “Look at all that hair!” and held our chubby, blue-faced baby up for a brief moment over the blue curtain.

Blake laughed nervously and raised his eyebrows in my direction. “So, there she is!”

“Yeah, there she is.”

“Do we have a name?” a nurse asked.

“Addelyn,” I said. “Addelyn Ruth.”

“Addelyn Ruth,” she repeated. “Well, dad, you better get your camera ready.”

Blake stood as directed and snapped the pictures the nurse told him to snap. Then, after Addie was swaddled, her head covered in a pink and blue striped cap, Blake posed with her at the side of the operating table beside me. All that was visible was his glasses between his cap and mask, but even a smile is evident, lifting the puffy blue fabric upward. The nurse showed

me the picture. “Proud daddy,” she said. “We’ll take him with us down to the nursery, and then they’ll both be back with you in the recovery room in a few minutes.”

It seemed much longer than a few minutes. After Blake and Addie had left the room, the nausea I always experience from anesthesia set in. As I vomited in a metal bowl that a nurse held beside my head, my shoulder muscles began to contract painfully. The nurse tilted my bed to relieve some of the pressure, and I began to feel better. I closed my eyes and reminded myself, *This time he is here*. I just wished he were still in the room to massage my neck or hold my hand.

When I entered the recovery room, my mom brought Georg in, along with my sister and her six month old son. “I can’t believe all that hair,” mom said. “Dark hair. So beautiful.”

She lifted George onto the side of my bed. “Hi buddy,” I said. “Did you see baby Addie?”

“Yeah,” he answered quietly. He studied the bracelets on my wrist.

“Is it weird to see mommy in a hospital bed?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Don’t worry. Mommy isn’t sick, just a little tired after having the baby. Did you see your daddy?” George’s presence and his concern were good distractions as I waited impatiently to hold my baby girl.

“We saw him in the nursery with Addie,” Erin said. “He looked pretty nervous.”

I laughed. “Was daddy nervous?” I asked George.

“Yeah, and Addie was crying.”

“They were just checking out your baby sister. Little babies never like that,” Erin explained.

“They’ll bring her in here in a couple minutes,” I told George. “And then you’ll get to hold your baby sister.” I was reminding myself as much as him that in a matter of minutes we’d have our baby girl in our arms. I

While we waited for Blake and Addie, Erin asked, “So did Blake peek over the curtain during the delivery?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “You never did. Of course Blake wouldn’t. He even tried to *forget* the camera. The nurse had to force him to bring it with.” As if he sensed our conversation and wanted to step in to defend himself, Blake appeared at the edge of the tan curtain, a nurse pushing a hospital bassinet beside him. I squeezed George, who sat on the mattress beside me. “Here she is.”

My sister and mom stepped to the edge of the curtained room, snapping pictures as Blake, George, and I huddled around Addelyn, admiring her pursed lips, alert eyes, and the way she flexed her fingers and clenched them into tight fists. Blake’s anxiety disappeared, the concern melted from George’s face, and I stopped comparing. For the moment, at least.

Buoyancy

It was closing in on me when I woke.

I lay frozen, inhaling coarse darkness, allowing my eyes to flicker but trying not to turn, not to make any move towards the thing I sensed outside my room. I pursed my lips, clenched my brow. When the thing fluttered in the hall, I gasped. And I knew I would have to look.

I peeled my sleep-heavy head from the pillow, strained my neck forward until I could see the shrouded shape. It froze outside my door as if it sensed me, too. My son's nightlight, glowing from the next room, reflected off the sunken sphere, highlighting its broad forehead and narrow, drooping chin. My breath halted and I held my body still as I listened to the wheeze, the crinkle, the rasp of this thing, barely audible over the inhale and exhale of the furnace.

Raising my neck and shoulders off the bed, I reached to my right, fingers floundering until they landed on the ruffled edge of my daughter's bassinet. Anchored there, I hunched my back, crept forward on the mattress, and hesitated at the edge. I studied the menacing presence in the hallway. Wrinkled, pink skin. Sunken face. I noted a tail, or a tongue maybe, dangling. And then it began to move, ducking under the door jam, levitating to the ceiling, bobbing along towards me—sagging, lifting slightly, and sagging again.

Finally, as it neared the foot of the bed, I made out letters, the words "It's a Girl!" plastered on a pitiful, Mylar face. A mossy green diaper pin caved into a grotesque grin; pallid blue bear and ashen rocking horse folded in on themselves like heavy eyelids. I shuddered at the transformation—innocence to ugliness—as I recalled the fruit tray and gift bags, the table lined with pink fleece, the rattle fastened to the bottom of a helium balloon at a baby shower the

previous week. It was just a balloon, hovering there, leaking helium. Still, I couldn't relax my pinched, angry face.

Anger. The emotion surprised me.

I lifted Addelyn from her bassinet, tucked a furry gray blanket around her body, and nuzzled my chin into the soft folds of her neck. Trying to ignore the balloon that rasped by the door, I closed my eyes and focused on her gentle snore. I inhaled her milk-sour scent, breathed in time with her heavy exhales and stroked her curled, uncalloused fingers until my own breathing slowed and my lips relaxed. When my cheek fell to meet her fringe of brown hair, I knew it was time to lay her in the bassinet. I hated to do it, preferring the heat of her sleeping body against me, but I needed to sleep.

As I slid my arm from between Addelyn's warm body and the cool, thin mattress, I remembered the nights, four years earlier, when George was a baby. Then, I slept all night with him beside me because Blake was not there to occupy the other side of the bed. George didn't even have a bassinet in my apartment, just a crib, and it remained pristine, sheets unwashed for the first year of his life. But now the husband who was at war when our first child was born was sleeping soundly in our bed.

I tugged at the bedspread, exposing the smooth skin of Blake's slender back as I made space for myself and crawled in. I studied the ceiling, careful not to look towards the doorway, trying to forget the balloon. But as I lay there, I felt myself deflating, too, flattening against the mattress as the expectations I'd built up for family life seeped from me, mingled with the bedroom air, gave it weight.

I turned toward Blake but stopped before snuggling into his warmth. Teetering on my left side, I brushed the peak of his shoulder blade, traced the bumps of his spine down to the

familiar mole near the center of his back. I leaned forward and breathed him in, felt the tingle of fine hair on my lips as I kissed the air just above his skin.

* * *

Three weeks earlier, I'd been sleeping in the recliner when a bead of sweat skated over my skin, tickling my chest. Details registered: Addie's hot forehead, hair damp with sweat, cheeks clammy. Thinking I'd swaddled her too tightly, I uncoiled fleece, but her neck and arms were hot to the touch. Her hand, even. I lunged to the bathroom and began fumbling through empty prescription bottles and the silver-lined squares of cold medicine, finding three dead thermometers and finally one with working batteries. I slipped Addie's arm from her sleeper and tucked the cool plastic into her pale armpit.

101.2 degrees.

I pulled my laptop from the coffee table and Googled infant temperature tables. The first two sites warned that any temp over 100 degrees was serious for an infant of her age. They both said, "Contact your doctor immediately."

Immediately.

Still, I reasoned. Addie had been eating well all night, and she'd been wide-eyed as usual after each feeding, studying my face and the bright slivers of light beaming in from the street. She had to be fine. Surely the fever would come down with Tylenol, the doctor's visit could wait for acute care in the morning.

I felt Addie's flushed skin and checked her temperature again: 101.4. Holding her high on my chest, my cheek tucked against her forehead, I carried her to the kitchen and pulled the

thick phonebook from the junk drawer. Thin, yellow pages rattled as I searched for Ask-A-Nurse. I dialed the number, just in case.

I explained the fever, emphasized Addie's normal sleeping, eating, and alertness, but when a nurse returned my call, she lowered her voice and spoke slowly. "That fever is dangerously high for a baby at three weeks. You must take her in. This shouldn't wait until morning."

My heart swelled and struck the walls of my chest so hard my skin tingled and my ears rang. I grabbed the diaper bag from beside the chair and buckled Addie in her car seat. Her body radiated heat, but I slid a fleece hat over her damp hair and tucked a flannel quilt around her shoulders and up under her feet. I wiggled my bare feet into tennis shoes, zipped my coat, and started out the door before I paused and remembered Blake.

I placed Addie's seat near the back door, then crept towards our bedroom. With weight balanced on the balls of my feet, careful not to creak the floorboards, I snuck through my own house like an intruder. I felt my way to Blake's side of the bed and hovered over him, whispering, "Addie's sick. I'm taking her to the emergency room."

His answer was sluggish, almost inaudible. "Okay," he said.

"I think she's fine, but I'll call you when I know more."

"What's wrong?"

"She has a fever," I said. Blake squinted through the dark like he didn't recognize me, as if I resembled someone he used to know, or as if I'd changed significantly. I stood and said, "I guess you should stay here with George." I wished he would offer, say the words—"maybe I should come with"—even if he didn't get out of bed.

"Yeah. Well, call if you need anything," he said, his voice slowed with sleep.

Blake flipped onto his side, tucking one corner of the quilt over his own head, the other around George, who had snuck from his own bed into ours. George wiggled backwards until he was curled into his dad's chest. I leaned over to kiss my son's cheek, then drifted back through the dark, lifting Addie's car seat as I rushed out the door.

* * *

At the emergency room, technicians tested Addie's blood and attempted a urine sample, then explained that a spinal tap might be necessary. "If it's an infection, we need to find out the cause right away. An infection could mean a lot of things." The diagnosis of Influenza A turned out to be a relief. An hour later I was on my way home with instructions to pay close attention to her eating and drinking so she didn't become dehydrated. Relatively simple, but still frightening.

By 5:30, Addie and I had settled back into the recliner in our living room. I rocked with her as she nursed and slept, nursed and slept, and her red cheeks returned to pink. At 6:30 Blake's cell phone alarm sounded its bell tone. A few minutes later he stumbled into the bathroom. When he turned on the shower, my rocking quickened and the chair began to squeak. *He's getting up for work, I thought. He didn't get up to ask, to check on us, just for work. Like nothing happened.* I listened to the creaking floorboards as he made his way back to the bedroom, the slide of the closet as he searched for clothes, and finally the whining zip of his wool coat. When his shadow crept toward me, I pulled air in and pushed it out slowly, feigning sleep. He asked from the hallway, "Are you girls going to be all right?"

Eyes still shut, I answered, "Addie's fine."

* * *

The night before the balloon materialized, I had swaddled Addie in her blanket, laid her in the bassinet, and flopped onto the mattress next to Blake. Addie was six weeks old, and I hadn't slept much in the bed during those six weeks. As I flipped onto my side, Blake slid his hand over my hip, his skin crackling over blue and white snowman fleece. When his fingers swept across my stomach, folds of skin quivered. I sucked in and instinctively rushed his hand away, placing it on the sharp bone of my hip.

I willed my stomach muscles to relax, but my sagging belly made me cringe. Feeling more like a mother than a wife, I wanted to lift Addelyn from her bassinet and retreat to the recliner where I'd spent most of those last six weeks. In the chair, I could listen for Addie's whistling breath, feel the minute movements of her chest. I'd read that sleeping in chairs or on couches with infants puts them at greater risk of SIDS, but it still felt safer to me. I slept better with the immediacy of her life against me. I slept better in that chair.

It was an ugly chair—its thick-wale corduroy faintly stained with my blood from a miscarriage the previous year and worn to strings by my feet, which I often folded up under me—but I'd spent three years' worth of mornings there, snuggled under a blanket with George and a pile of dinosaur books. It was the same chair I had rocked George to sleep in when he was a baby, when I daydreamed about Blake coming home from Iraq, when I tried to imagine how nice it would be to raise a baby with a full-time, fully present husband. Then, I had filled myself with hopeful dreams of what a good dad Blake would be, of how he'd rock the baby to sleep, feed him bottles, and give me time to rest. The dreams were lighter than the air around me. Lighter than images of young men in camouflage underscored by their dates of birth and death.

Lighter than local news updates on a soldier from Blake's unit, crippled by a roadside bomb. Lighter than the reality of Blake missing the first year of his son's life, the possibility of Blake never knowing his son. The dreams saved me, elevated me.

But when Addelyn was born, those dreams morphed into expectations—expectations for the life I was living, not dreams for the future. They taunted me with the possibility of immediate fulfillment: Blake would be home from work soon, and he would take George to the park so that I could nap with Addie, but maybe before he left he would change Addie's diaper, too, bring me some water, some almond fudge ice cream. These were conceivable possibilities, expectations, really, and when left unmet, they seeped from me like helium through Mylar and left me wrinkled, on the verge of caving in. But much of the problem was that my expectations wouldn't pause to be fulfilled; instead they multiplied, even as I destroyed the possibility of their fulfillment.

Though I had fantasized about what an amazing, hands-on father Blake would be, when he had the chance to become that man, I lacked the patience to let him soothe Addie. When she cried, I wanted him to intuitively learn to hold her just so, with her stomach pressed into his chest like I did, her feet tucked under his left arm. But suggestions—"Maybe try walking around with her"—came out distorted by thoughts—*She probably doesn't want to share the spotlight with Stewie from Family Guy*. Those suggestions transformed into thinly veiled demands. "Just hold her, you know, flat against you like I do. She likes that." Demands gave way to criticism, "It looks like you're bouncing her too much."

Then one or both of us would give up. I might say, "I suppose I'll just take her. You and George can go play downstairs so Addie and I can rest." Or Blake might ask, "Do you think

she's hungry? Maybe she's hungry." Then he might add, "I guess I can't do anything about that." He was right. I was too tired to pump breast milk, so he couldn't do anything about that.

My expectations continued to elevate, rising through the atmosphere, growing more and more unattainable, until they escaped into outer space. There, they collected and hung, beautiful and glowing against a night sky, but well beyond reach. So I ended up back in the chair with Addie, listening to Blake and George's growls and giggles as they played carnivores versus herbivores downstairs. I changed Addie's diapers and snapped her sleepers while Blake bathed George and dressed him in baseball pajamas. I nursed her while the two of them read *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Engine that Could*.

I had expected that this time, Blake and I would marvel together at the miracle of our child. My idealization: Addelyn lying on the floor between us, her right hand curling around my pinky, her left tightening instinctively around her dad's finger as he traced the creases of her palm. My reality: me trying to explain to him the miracle of eyelashes growing thicker, of strings of infant sneezes and the disgusted shiver and sigh when the final, tickling sneeze didn't come. These were things he didn't notice, because he was too busy watching TV, or working, or tending to George. I thought that the word fatherhood would take on new meaning for him once he experienced infancy first hand. He seemed to experience fatherhood from the outside, like it didn't swell inside him and elevate him as motherhood did me.

For nearly six weeks, while he and George snuggled under the covers of our queen-sized bed, I spent my nights in the chair with Addie, feeding her on demand, checking her breathing, never seeming to fall fully asleep. I stayed in that chair almost every night. Through the night.

Sometimes it seemed like an accident. I would think I was watching *King of the Hill* or *The Office* along with Blake, when suddenly I would wake up to clay-mation blood splattering

the screen and Barbie-esque figures with red cheerio mouths performing illicit sex acts on screen. When I noticed that Blake had gone to bed, I would consider following his lead, but feeling tired and deflated, knowing that I would end up back in the same chair for a mid-night feeding in an hour or less, I would reach for the remote and flip channels from Cartoon Network to HGTV to watch whatever home buying or home decorating show was on in the middle of the night.

And when Blake got up for work in the morning, I would watch from the recliner, see his shadow move from the bedroom to the bathroom, hear the trickle of water, feel the warmth of steam as he emerged, clean. I would talk to him, tell him to drive carefully and to have a nice day. Then I would listen to the door clicking shut, engine growling, tires chewing gravel, and wonder how he could leave for the day without kissing our daughter's full, pink cheek.

* * *

After recognizing the balloon, I fell back to sleep. But I woke a second time. I had flipped to my right side and lay near the edge of the bed with my arm reaching up over the edge of Addelyn's bassinet, my fingers resting on her chest. I could hear the balloon again, rasping and wheezing, raking against the ceiling. It came at me this time from the dark corner above Blake's head. Its skin crinkled as it deflated and descended slowly towards me.

When I turned to confront it, it paused again, hovering over me, nodding, up and down and up and down. Nodding just slightly, as if it knew something. As if we shared some secret.

Maybe the balloon nodded in agreement, knowing like I did that Blake was a good dad and that I was overreacting. Maybe it knew that I had often found myself borrowing Blake's

baby-bouncing technique (the one I equated to baby shaking), to sooth Addelyn. Maybe it nodded in confirmation of my suspicion—that Blake’s reluctance to be a hands-on dad to baby Addie had something to do with his regret over missing that opportunity with George. Maybe it nodded to reassure me that Blake just needed time to learn and that as Addelyn grew older—sturdier, as Blake would call it—he would become comfortable with diaper changing, bathing, and dressing his daughter, that as she began to appreciate the smiles and voices of people other than her mother, Blake would bound through the door at the end of his work day, his blue eyes searching for his daughter’s matching ones, his voice rising into a silly squeal as he greeted her, as they exchanged full-cheeked smiles of mutual admiration. Maybe it nodded because it didn’t have a finger to shake at me, to say you’re making a big deal of nothing. You’re focusing on what he’s not doing, missing all the good things.

Whatever secret the balloon wanted to share with me would have to wait, though, because that night I needed sleep more than I needed fulfillment. So I reached up, grabbed the flimsy tail where pink and white ribbons had once curled, then cinched my hands around the balloon, tightening its skin into a weightless dumbbell, and crammed the balloon under the bed.

Disability

When Blake came home from Iraq, I had no conception of the term disability. He'd come home alive. He'd never been shot, hit by shrapnel, or whatever else might happen to a soldier on active duty. He'd never even dropped a helmet on his toe. With no visible injuries, he was fine on the outside. He seemed normal. No outward signs of PTSD, although once in his first weeks home he crouched at the side of the bed in the middle of the night, scratching at the walls, his voice erupting in deep, uneven screeches as if he were trying to escape a terrible dream. But the episode never reoccurred, and as weeks slipped by, into months and years, he seemed perfectly well adjusted. Normal. But normalcy mutates slowly, its nebulous borders stretching almost imperceptibly.

* * *

After lunch at my father-in-law's house one Saturday afternoon, I watched George step carefully down the cement steps, his hand dragging along the wobbly silver railing, knowing better than to depend on it for support. He'd walked those stairs enough times to know that the rail could give out at any moment.

George was on his way outside to warm up for the game of waffle ball he'd been promised would begin as soon as his dad, uncle, and I cleaned up the kitchen. Instead of clearing the table, I paused to watch George, who strolled across the yard, glancing from side to side as if he sensed someone watching. He turned and jogged loosely back toward the step, his wiry arms dangling at his sides, not drawn up and pumping back and forth in usual running fashion. "It's

official. George has inherited his dad's signature run," I said, recognizing the singular trot that made Blake easy to identify as he ran across the outfield, even when the number on his Bryant Bucs jersey was hidden.

Brock laughed and peered over my shoulder, "Yep, stiff-armed but lightning fast, just like his dad."

"And look how cute," I said, motioning toward the window at George, balanced in a lunging position, "he's stretching."

Brock turned again to check George's pre-game routine. "He's serious about his game, Amber. Nobody wants a pulled muscle."

"I guess not," I said with a grin. "He's learned a lot watching you guys warm up for games."

I returned to the sink, immersing my hands in the dish soap that bubbled from a frying pan, when Brock burst into a laugh. "Oh, that's hilarious," he said between peals of laughter. "Blake, you've gotta see this." Blake and I stepped to the window to find George, hands on hips, learning his torso back and to each side. He repeated the motion several times, slowly, then hunched his shoulders forward and squinted, wincing with imaginary pain. Brock glanced at Blake. "What does that tell you?"

"That George needs a backiotomy, too?" Blake joked, employing his brother's term for the imaginary back replacement surgery that would alleviate the pain Blake felt since returning from Iraq, the pain that was classified in military terms as a ten percent disability.

"Poor kid thinks that's normal," Brock said. "His dad's a cripple, so he thinks he should be, too."

* * *

Normal. It was sad, but true. Blake came home from war with a new kind of normal. Each morning, he slid his legs off the bed and stood slowly, his back locked straight, and shuffled around the house as if he couldn't lift his feet. It took me a while to recognize that shuffle—the shuffle of the old men I had served dinner to in the nursing home, men whose slippered feet slid over the surface of the floor, inching their way toward the dining room. Blake was twenty-eight years old, and he was walking like an old man.

At first I only noticed the shuffle in the morning, but when spring came, Blake began spending days working with his dad and brother on the farm, working for my dad in his agronomy office, and playing baseball with the amateur team he'd played with since high school. After work or games, he shuffled his feet in the evening, too, when he lifted himself from the couch, asking me, "Are you ready for bed?" As I switched off the TV and prepared to make my way to bed, I would listen to Blake's feet dragging over our squeaky hardwood floors, to the scrub of bristles over teeth, the swish and spit of fluoride, and finally, the rattle of pill bottles.

I didn't think much of the pill bottles at first, either. After his discharge physical, Blake was diagnosed with degenerative disk disease, and he received a prescription for pain medication, orders for physical therapy. I had experienced back pain all my life, surgery at the age of thirteen, so back pain wasn't foreign to me. I'd learned to live with mine, and I assumed initially that Blake would do the same. But one day I went to the medicine cabinet for Ibuprophen to ease a headache and found the bottle I'd recently purchased almost empty.

"Did your prescriptions from the VA run out, or what?" I asked Blake.

“No, I’ve still got them, still take them, but they don’t help that much, really.” He didn’t look at me as he spoke. “They take the edge off, kind of, but they don’t really stop my back from hurting.”

“So you take Ibuprophen, too?” I asked, shaking the empty pill bottle to prove that it was empty. Blake nodded. “How much?”

“Not that much.”

“How much?” I persisted.

“Depends. Six, maybe, but not usually during the day. Just at night, so I can sleep.” There it was. Normal. This seemed normal to him. “If I have a game, if I think I’ll actually have to play, I take six or so then, too, a couple hours before the game so that hopefully I can loosen up.”

“You’re serious? Six? That can’t be good for you. You can’t do that all your life, Blake. It’ll kill your stomach.” I cringed at the sound of my voice, the reprimanding tone.

“It’s not that bad. Just ibuprophen, it’s not gonna kill me.”

“Yeah, but if it’s that bad, you have to go back to the doctor. They have to give you something better, something that helps more.”

“You’re right,” Blake answered. “You’re absolutely right.” This was a phrase I would get used to hearing in conversations like these.

He was only agreeing to silence me, satisfy me temporarily. I didn’t understand his reluctance. Maybe the VA was difficult to work with, had limited resources, or maybe he didn’t think they could help, but I began to think about disability in a new way—as something invisible, almost undetectable, but life-changing.

* * *

For a while, Blake was known in his family and on his baseball team as the Bionic Man. He didn't have any robotic body parts, of course, but he did have a battery operated nerve stimulator that was supposed to lessen his back pain. For a while, he wore the device every day, sometimes asking me to help him place electrode patches on either side of his spine. He carried the small, black control box in his pocket. At work or at home, he would turn it off and on at fifteen minute intervals, as per doctor's orders, hoping to relax his muscles enough to improve mobility.

"You should try it," he told me. "You like massages and stuff, maybe you'd like this."

"Does it help?" I asked.

"It might. You'd probably like it."

"No, I mean, does it help you? Does it feel good?"

"It doesn't feel *bad*," he said. "I'm not sure it really gives me any mobility, like it's supposed to, but it's not bad."

After a few weeks, a month maybe, he got tired of being the bionic man. The VA suggested steroid injections. He tried those, too, with the same results. More pain medication supplemented with Ibuprophen, and still no relief.

Before going to Iraq, Blake spent his summers golfing and playing baseball. After he returned home, he only golfed when a wedding or company tournament required it. And he slowly but steadily started avoiding baseball, too. He only got on the field when he absolutely had to, saying the young guys needed more playing time, more experience. They were the future of the team, he said, and if they didn't get playing time, didn't improve themselves, the team

would dwindle out. It was hard to keep an amateur baseball team going in a small town; the young kids needed to feel invested in the team. But I wasn't worried about the baseball team; I was worried about my husband, watching him lose a part of himself.

* * *

“You need to be honest about how bad it is. They'll never know unless you tell them. I mean, people with stupid injuries—like broken toes or things that don't even bother them—and they get more disability than you do.” I wasn't the only one who noticed how bad Blake's back was. Brock knew, and he told me Blake needed to get his disability reevaluated. My uncle, who had served in Vietnam, told me Blake needed to get things documented sooner rather than later. He said it only gets harder to get disability reevaluated the longer a person waits. “You just have to do it. You have to really tell them how bad it is.”

The more I pushed, it seemed, the more Blake resisted. The conversation became a regular one, and even though I hated telling Blake what to do, I kept insisting, until one night he presented his side of the argument. “You're right, Amber. I should get it reevaluated,” he said. “But I'm not gonna be *that* guy. I mean, I know guys who get ridiculous amounts of disability, guys who are supposedly messed up, PTSD or whatever. And their lives really aren't that bad. They're just playing the system.”

My insistence was interrupted momentarily while I defended the position of these nameless soldiers Blake was mentioning. “That's not exactly fair, though. You don't know for sure. You don't know what their lives are like. Maybe it *is* that bad, they just seem to keep it together on the outside.” I raised my eyebrows to remind Blake of his own masquerade.

“No, I’m talking about guys who’ve never seen anything, never even been in a real war zone,” he explained. “100% disability. It’s just stupid.”

“Okay, so I see what you mean,” I conceded. “I just think there’s a possibility, you know, maybe they do have some kind of issues.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. But it can’t possibly be that bad. Or at least it’s not military disability. They’re just playing the system. And I’m not gonna be *that* guy.”

I still didn’t agree wholeheartedly, but I did respect Blake’s position. This was the honorable soldier I remembered from the beginning of our relationship. The sense of duty. And this was the patient man who had convinced me so many times that things were and would be fine. The acceptance of life, the lack of dissatisfaction. So I had to admit that he was right. In comparison to some soldiers, Blake was fine. But I didn’t agree, fully. I was beginning to redefine disability, measuring it against Blake’s normal, not everyone else’s.

* * *

For as long as I could remember, Blake had spent his summers playing baseball and golf, and since high school, I had spent summers watching him play. He even tried to teach me to golf, once, but after a morning at the driving range and a painful 9-hole round in which we had to let several groups play past us, I took Blake back to the trailer house I was sub-letting for the summer and made him a hamburger. Years later he would tell me that on his way home he stopped to golf another round but ended up puking in the trees along the third hole, because I’d given him food poisoning. He said he thought the burger tasted strange when he took the first bite, but he ate it anyway, and the more he ate, the less he noticed the off taste. He was always

willing to suspend judgment, to wait and see how things turned out. He even took me golfing several more times, never letting on to the frustration he can now admit he felt. He was always so patient. He's a patient batter, too. I've never known anyone to get walked more often than Blake. "Hey, at least I get on base," he says in self defense.

I followed Blake to district and state tournaments before we were even dating. I stayed in the dugout all night, drinking Old Mil Light, just so I could sit next to him, just so I could hear stories about the homeruns he used to hit in Legion baseball, about how he'd be a wonderful pitcher if only he could throw the full distance from pitcher's mound to home plate, about the time he tried to throw an alternator through a window but didn't even crack the glass. So much of our romance—the story of us—was somehow tied up in baseball. And ever since our first ultrasound, when I was pregnant with George, when we found out we were having a boy and Blake insisted on driving three hours to Clark where the baseball team was playing just so he could walk in the dugout and tell his brothers that he was having a son, I knew baseball would be a central part of the father-son relationship.

That night, Brock had run from the dugout to the fence behind home plate, giving me a thumbs-up through the grey grid and yelling, "Good job, Amber! It's a boy – that's awesome!" When Blake emerged behind him, I saw the proud grin on his face and remembered the stories they had told about bat boys for the Bryant Bucs when their dad still played. "That's gotta be an awesome feeling," Brock would say, "when your own kids look up to you like that." When George was old enough to start cheering at games, he often sat behind home plate, yelling, "Hit a homerun daddy! Hit a homerun!" over and over again until Blake's at bat ended. Brock talk about it after games, saying, "I remember that. Sitting there, thinking, *That's my dad.*"

“Yeah, but it’s kind of a lot of pressure,” Blake joked. “That’s why I’ve gotta end my baseball career. Right now, while George still assumes his dad hits homeruns. Before he figures out how to say, ‘Daddy struck out.’”

But George doesn’t seem too worried. He loves playing baseball with his dad, and Blake shows George the same kind of patience he showed me when trying to correct my golf swing. When we go to the small field near our house so George can take some batting practice, Blake reminds me: “Don’t ever correct him on his swing. Remind him to turn his body, make sure he’s holding the bat right, but other than that, just let him swing. He’ll figure the rest out. The worst thing you can do is get a kid thinking too much about it. He’s just gotta swing until he figures it out.”

* * *

But patience can be problematic. A willingness to wait and see how things turn out can turn into an easy excuse not to act, to tolerate unnecessary suffering. Sometimes action is necessary.

When I went to the kitchen to put away my laptop one night after reaching the bottom of a mound of student essays, Blake followed me. The kids had been sleeping for hours, and I was ready to join them, ready to put a few hours of sleep between myself and the revision symbols and comments I’d been scribbling.

“So, I had an appointment at the VA today,” he said.

“That’s right,” I said, resting my hand on the counter. “So did you finally get the results from your MRI?”

“I did,” he said. “They still don’t want to do surgery, so that’s good.” He nodded, as if to spur the conversation on, which surprised me. This wasn’t a topic he usually brought up.

“I guess so,” I said, “but do they have any treatment options for you?”

“Some new pills,” he said, shrugging. “A sleeping pill, too, this time.”

“A sleeping pill? You’re serious?” I asked, suddenly feeling sick. For months, Blake, the kids and I had been playing what I called musical beds. Sometime after midnight, the sound of small hands fumbling with a doorknob, the plod of tired feet over laminate flooring signaled that Addie needed comfort. After flipping a blanket or two, at least one pacifier, and often a bald baby doll or stuffed animal onto the mattress, she would climb in and roll her body over mine, landing in the soft ditch between Blake and I. A few hours later, George would follow, lifting the covers on my side of the bed and snuggling into my chest. And usually, when I woke sometime between four and six in the morning, I would find Blake’s side of the bed empty. When his alarm went off, I would find him curled in the soft red fleece of our living room blanket either on the couch or in Addie’s single bed. I’d assumed his part in this game of bed-switching was just an escape from the heat of too many sleeping bodies, the sharp knees and elbows of our kids. Suddenly, I understood the night time ritual as silent suffering. Blake couldn’t sleep. “So that’s why you get up at night? It’s really that bad?”

Blake nodded. *When did this happen?* I wondered. *How did I not notice that it was this bad?* I remembered my mom commenting on Blake’s walk—the strange stiffness of his torso, the motion of his legs limited by the awkward angle—and how it made her want to cry, seeing him in so much pain. *That was almost a year ago,* I thought, wanting to cry myself as I realized how normal it had become to see him that way. Then Blake said, “You know, I’ve decided, I’m

going to get my disability reevaluated. I'm gonna get whatever documents I need together, and I'm gonna go for whatever I can get."

"Wow. It really is that bad." I felt the need to apologize. "I'm sorry. I mean, I know it is. You're thirty-three years old, and you have to take a pill so you can sleep through the pain? It's terrible. What's it going to be like when you're fifty? Do you worry about that?"

"Yeah, it's awfully disappointing," Blake said. It was the strongest reaction, the strongest expression of emotion I'd ever heard from him on the subject. "But it is what it is."

Stupid Kids

The kids had fallen asleep, and Blake and I sat in the living room—him watching TV, me grading student papers as usual. But I couldn't concentrate. Each scribble of handwriting, each students' name reminded me of the news I'd gotten earlier that day. One of my students had attempted suicide.

"I still can't believe it," I told Blake. "One of my students tried to kill himself." I turned to look at Blake, shaking my head as I continued. This truth still hovered in the back of my mind, as if maybe it was someone else's story I was confusing with my own experience. "Can you believe that? It's just so crazy. A smart kid, kind of quiet, but from a good family. And he just doesn't think he can handle things, or . . . I don't know . . . but whatever it is, he thinks life is so bad he has to die."

I knew I couldn't tell him too much. I didn't even know very much. The kid was so much like all the other students in my classes. He walked into my class in his jeans and t-shirts, books tucked under his arm, chatting with classmates as he slid into his seat. He usually smiled and chattered during classroom activities. He'd missed quite a bit of class, sure, but he was so smart. Even when it was clear he hadn't studied, he earned A grades on tests. And then, suddenly, he was gone for a couple weeks. When he came back, he hinted at the reason for his absence and ended by saying, "Maybe you should talk to the counselor so you know exactly what happened." When I talked to the counselor, she was shocked but pleased to learn that this kid had let me in, even if just a crack, to his story. So she explained a bit more clearly the reason for his absence: multiple suicide attempts. "He actually tried more than once," I told Blake. "Can you believe that? A kid from small town South Dakota. It just doesn't seem like his life

could be that bad, you know. It doesn't seem like he should feel like he has to . . ." I stopped talking, didn't know what else to say. I'd felt compelled to tell Blake, as if speaking the words might help me reach some understanding or at least belief, and usually he was a willing listener, but that night he kept flipping through channels. He almost seemed to be ignoring me. I stared in his direction, studying my words, trying to figure out why the silence felt so strange, until he spoke.

"Yeah," Blake said. "Kids do stupid things."

I squinted my eyes, jutting my nose toward him. "Are you serious? Did you just? Do you really think it's that simple?"

"Yeah, kids are stupid. They do stupid things." He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, not looking at me.

What a jerk. I exhaled the thought. Then I was the one shaking my head. I knew Blake could be like that sometimes, sort of callous about people's problems. When someone was diagnosed with cancer, he might say, "Yeah, it's sad, but he's lived a good life. Has a good family. Nobody lives forever." And while I agreed with the basic principles Blake based such assessments on, I hated how harsh he could sound. I knew he was just seeing the good side of things, not getting bogged down in inevitable realities, and I appreciated his was of staying grounded in reality and not getting swept up in emotion, but sometimes I wanted him to just feel. Feel sorry for someone else. Have some sympathy. Like for a teenage kid who had tried to kill himself.

"That's a terrible thing to say, Blake. He's just a kid."

"Yeah, I know. He's just a kid. Doesn't know any better. So he did something stupid. That's what I mean. Kids do stupid things."

I still couldn't believe his insensitivity—to me, the way he dismissed my concern, to my student, the way he seemed to dismiss the seriousness of his situation. I couldn't listen any more. The conversation was having the opposite effect I had intended. So I dropped it. Dropped my gaze back to the homework on my lap. But I couldn't focus my eyes or my thoughts. *How can he be so callous?* I wasn't ready to confront this side of my husband. I knew it was no use, anyway, because I approached life's problems from a place of sympathy and Blake approached them from a place of harsh reality. But I wasn't in the mood to debate the pros and cons of our differing perspectives, so I pretended to continue on with my grading.

One the couch, Blake went quiet, too, and I assumed he'd returned his attention to whatever show he was watching on TV. The familiar *Family Guy* jingle, which I usually couldn't help but hum along to, boomed from the TV. When Blake chuckled, my first instinct was annoyance, but then I glanced up at the TV and realized the show hadn't even begun. When the show's title flashed and faded into a commercial break, I knew Blake wasn't attending to his show. He's an endless channel surfer who can't stand to watch even a second of commercials. I leaned forward slightly, tilted my head toward Blake, but he didn't notice. He was staring.

“You know, there was this kid who offed himself in a port-a-john.”

I didn't know. It took me a moment to react. “Someone you knew? When was this?”

‘In Baghdad,’ he said, as he reached for the remote control. He chuckled again, and this time I recognized it—the deep, muffled laugh that shook inside the mass of his body, never actually escaping. I'd heard it before, when Blake told me the funny war story, but he hadn't told me any war stories in a long time. I'd never pushed to hear them, not wanting him to feel like I was prying. I wasn't sure if I could handle them anyway, so we'd hardly talked at all about

his experiences at war, but now that five years had gone by, I thought that if he was willing to share, the least I could do was listen. My exasperation softened.

“So did you know this kid? Or what happened?”

He began pushing buttons, the screen flashing as he continued. “I didn’t know him at all, actually. But, we were doing those night missions, sleeping during the day. So I went to sleep one morning, woke up later when I heard a gunshot, but you hear gunshots, stuff going on all around, all the time, so it woke me up, but I didn’t think anything of it.” The screen flashed from full color to a sheet of blue as he paged through a list of programs. “I got up to go to the bathroom, and there was a bunch of guys cleaning the shitters. I wondered what those guys did to deserve that, you know. That was a real shit job. The Iraqi’s usually did it.” Another chuckle. “Turned out they were cleaning up the kid’s mess.”

I found myself in the familiar position of not knowing what to say. As much as I wanted to support Blake, I really had no idea how to react. His hardness, his laugh. It still scared me somehow. “That’s terrible,” was all I could say. There were so many moments like that, all related to his military service, when I had no words, no sense of real understanding.

“Yeah, it really is.” Blake said. “And later, I remember talking to Surna about it. It kinda made me mad, actually.” I tried not to shake my head as I listened to what I thought was more insensitivity. “I mean, why would you kill yourself in the worst place in the world, when you know that all you have to do is say one word, mention that and they’ll send you home? The Army doesn’t want this stuff to happen. They’d rather get a guy outta there than have stuff like that going on. All he had to do was say it, and he was home.” I could see the anger, how it rattled his head from side to side, and I began to understand. My disbelief, not understanding how a kid’s life could actually seem that bad, wasn’t that far from Blake’s idea that by failing to

see his options, by panicking instead of giving himself a chance, a kid was doing something stupid. He didn't mean the kid was stupid. His actions were. I began to modify my judgement. And then Blake said, "But then Surna had a pretty good point—that what if home is the problem." Surna had reminded him that we can't see causes and contributing factors from the outside. Hearing about this conversation, this sympathetic discussion, would have comforted me, but I was no longer thinking about my student. I was thinking about Blake and how glad I was, what a miracle it was, that he made it home alive.

I remembered an article I'd read about how married soldiers had a lower rate of suicide. I didn't let myself think directly about the feelings of fear, guilt, or horror that might lead soldiers to contemplate suicide, and I didn't let myself consider the possibility of Blake having ever experienced those feelings. I focused on the relief that Blake had something to come home to and that he made it home.

"So I guess that's what I mean. Kids are stupid, kids do stupid things."

"Yeah," I said. "I see what you mean. Sometimes kids—or any of us, really—just get too far into a hole. They just don't think there's any way out."

"Yeah, or sometimes they just do stupid things." He said. I couldn't help but smile at the way he kept pushing, kept himself close to the line of sounding like a jerk. I wanted to dig myself out from under the papers layered like sediment over my lap, but before I could move he had moved into another story. "There was this other kid, at the FAB down the road. Seven or eight miles down the road. This kid just went crazy. He jumped the fence and took off running, in his PT gear." This time Blake's laugh was more sincere. This time, I could tell he actually did find the story slightly amusing. "Not even his uniform, not with anything on. Just jumped the fence and took off running. Some guys were driving around and found him running down

the deal, down the road. Caught him and brought him back. Then a couple weeks later another kid tried to do it but they caught him before he got over the fence.”

I was happy to hear that both of these kids Blake was talking about had survived, so this time I was the one who chuckled nervously. I still wasn't sure about this humor, but I pictured a kid in black gym shorts, a grey t-shirt with ARMY printed across the front in bold black letters, just running out in the middle of nowhere, some guys in a camouflage truck chasing him down. If I tried, the scene could be mildly amusing somehow.

“We were on station, all ready to go out on a mission when they called and said they had to go 100%, accounting for everybody. Surna came around, checking everybody. He had to actually physically see each one and check them in, because some kid jumped the wall and took off running, and they didn't know who it was. Some stupid kid.”

Blake had stopped pretending to search for programs. The screen stood still, frozen blue ribbons. Blake looked ahead, but not at me, not at the TV. “Those kids weren't the only ones, though. We all did stupid things. So many things you look back on and think, that's ridiculous, the way we did things, almost trying to get yourself killed, knowing you had no business doing things that way.” I exhaled slowly, my cheeks burning, jaw itching, as if comforting warmth had developed into raging flame that consumed oxygen, leaving only brittle air.

Blake continued, “Like, they have these color codes for all the roads according to how dangerous they are. It changes all the time, but there were some places that you knew you were never supposed to go.” He shook his head at the memory, “Man, it was in the last weeks, we were just about ready to go home, so you know, guys knew pretty damn well where the bad spots were. And then the one day Surna gave directions to the airport, the route we should take, and we all laughed, thinking this isn't the way we're going, thinking he's messing with us.” His

voice slowed into the round tone of authority, emphasizing each word. “And then its, ‘Yeah, this is the only way we can go.’” He sat there on the couch, his head shaking, his upturned palm bobbing under the weight of inevitability. “And we all know, it’s like we’re begging to get killed. You tell yourself, ‘You’re gonna die doing that.’ But that’s the way that deal goes. You don’t have a choice.”

Tick Catcher

I tousled George's sandy blonde hair and teased, "We really need to trim this up before it covers your eyes." George hated haircuts and showed his resistance by pulling back. As he tilted his head away from me, my hand skimmed over his hair, and at the hairline, just as my fingertips slipped onto his warm skin, they fumbled over a lump the size of a raisin.

A shudder pulled my shoulder blades together, moving up through my neck until it lifted and jittered my chin. "Not another one," I said. I knew it was a tick.

I'd removed two ticks from George's hair earlier that day, and seven others over the previous week. I yelled toward the living room, "Blake, get in here! I need your help!" I turned to George and said, "Hold still, buddy," as I parted the hair near his temple to investigate.

I knew what to expect, and yet I couldn't prepare myself. Like twisting the arm of a jack-in-the-box, I peeled back each thin blonde strand slowly, prolonging the suspense of what I knew was coming. I turned my head and peered out of the corner of my eye. When I caught a glimpse of the tick's dirty dishwater color, the bulge of its engorged body, I inhaled sharply, my shoulders jerking and my eyes pinching tight as I curled into my own shoulder.

But then I had to look, to study the bulging parasite. It was fat like a golden raisin, but swelled up so that only faint traces of wrinkles remained. I'd seen many engorged ticks on our farm dogs when I was kid, but I'd never seen one on a person.

The shudder began again. "Ugh, so gross. Blake, hurry! I need you!"

When he stepped onto the worn linoleum of the kitchen floor, Blake spotted the tick immediately, protruding from the circle of hair I held flat like against George's scalp. His eyes widened as he came closer to inspect. "Get it off. Please, get it off," I pleaded, sliding my hands

away. I shook them in front of me frantically, remembering the legs of the ticks I had pulled earlier, how they struggled against my grip, tightening into fine wires, their resistance tickling my skin. “I already found four yesterday. I can’t do anymore. It’s your turn.”

Blake said nothing. He looked more fascinated than concerned as he studied the tick.

“That’s ten ticks in one week, Blake. That can’t be healthy.” I paced in the kitchen, waiting for Blake to respond or take action. He leaned in for a closer look. “I mean, think how many diseases these things carry, and then to have ten in one week. That has to up the chances of catching something.” Words tumbled from my mouth, clanging like dominos dumped onto a table. “We have to start putting bug spray on these kids. This is just disgusting.” Still quiet, Blake seemed to be ignoring me. “I’m serious, Blake. This can’t be healthy.”

This time he responded in an even tone. “Do we have a pliers?” This was my unshakable husband. Calm in the face of any creature. Unshaken by strange sounds at night.

“No. Well, yes, but I looked it up on the internet,” I explained, “and you’re not supposed to use pliers. It squeezes the tick too much, so then it’ll throw up, or spit up, or something, but anyway it’s more likely to pass on diseases.”

“So I should just pull it out with my fingers?”

“I guess so, but I suppose I should’ve bought one of those special tick removal things they sell.” Blake rolled his eyes subtly and with a shake of the head, breaking my hysteria. I laughed at his skepticism. “Yeah, I know. And you didn’t even see them. Some look like miniature crow bars. I guess a tweezer would probably work, but I don’t even have one of those.”

Having regained a sense of calm, I began to notice things--how Blake slid his hands down to cup George's cheeks, how he squatted in front of the five year old and peered into his forced, still, stare, how he said, "It's okay, buddy. I'll get it out of there."

"Will it hurt?" George stared past his dad, and his voice cracked as he questioned.

"Nope. It'll just take a second. Just hold still."

As Blake stood again, parting George's hair and preparing to pull out the tick, I noticed the way his voice plodded gently along as he reassured George. It was the same pacing and understated inflection that he used when reading bedtime stories. "Ten ticks in one week?" Blake said. "You're a good tick catcher, George. I don't know anyone else who's caught ten in a week." George smiled weakly. "And this one looks like a sheep tick. Even Millie hasn't caught one this big. Dogs are usually pretty good tick catchers, but nothing like you, I guess."

"A sheep tick?" George inquired.

"Just a big old tick like this one," Blake said as he strode into the bathroom to flush it down the toilet. "I've never seen anybody catch one before. Wait until you tell your grandpa about that."

"Yeah," George said, walking his fingers along his temple where the tick had been. "And I'll tell uncle Brock that I'm a good tick catcher, too."

"And you can ask Alex and Jace what's the most ticks they've ever caught in a week. I bet they've never caught ten." George grinned.

When George had returned to his cartoons, I pulled Blake into the kitchen. "So, obviously I overreacted a little, but it really isn't good. The one from yesterday, I think the head's still in there. There's a bump still. I don't want it to get infected. And I don't even know

what the symptoms of Lyme disease are. I mean, people get really sick from tick bites.” I was rambling again.

“Just relax,” Blake said. “It’s only a wood tick.”

“So what? It’s a tick. What difference does it make?”

“Only deer ticks carry Lyme disease. Yeah, we need to put bug spray on when we go outside, but it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Are you sure it’s only deer ticks?” I wanted to believe him, but I was skeptical. I wanted him to be right, and yet I didn’t want to be wrong.

“Yes, I’m sure. And they don’t live around here. Only up north, like in Minnesota and Wisconsin.”

My breathing began to slow. I told myself Blake was probably right. Blake had been hunting since before he was old enough to hold a gun himself, so he already knew a lot more about the outdoors than I did, even before he and George started reading Animal encyclopedias and books about all kinds of insects. Still, I had to check, so I got back on the internet. I found some sites that supported Blake’s theory that deer ticks are the dangerous ones, others that seemed to favor the kind of tick hysteria I’d been espousing. Reminding myself not to buy into exaggerated, fear-inducing, product promoting propaganda, I told myself to keep checking George for ticks, watching him for fever or other symptoms, and checking the spots we’d pulled ticks from for infection. He’d be fine.

Something about the tick incident, as I began calling it, bothered me. I told my sister, Erin, and my friend, Kristi, about it at our husbands' amateur baseball game, recounting the weeks' events tick by tick. Kristi responded, "Wow, I bet now you can't stop checking him, like you expect him to have ticks all the time."

"Well, yeah, I guess so," I said. But even as I said it, I realized it wasn't true. I corrected myself. "Actually, no. I have to admit, I almost don't want to touch him, because I'm afraid I'll find another one. Just thinking about it makes me shiver."

Erin and Kristi laughed, but I really didn't find it very amusing. I actually did feel bad. "Maybe that makes me an awful mother," I said, "but it's true. I cringe just thinking about it."

"Yeah, but that's normal," my sister reassured me. "It's not like you *won't* check him, you'll just gag while you do it."

"I guess you're right," I answered, relieved to remember that I had actually checked George a couple times since finding the fat tick. "But I really did flip out when we found the last one."

"Yeah, we'll, you'd reached your limit," Erin said. "It happens. We all freak out sometimes."

* * *

The story of the tick catcher quickly became a family favorite. When I told my father-in-law about George's ten ticks, George grinned and said, "Yeah, and my dad said one was as big as a sheep tick." He had clearly embraced his new title of Tick Catcher.

So I kept telling the story. Partly because of the enjoyment it George got from it, partly because I was proud of Blake and his ability to spin the situation so that George would feel pride rather than fear, but also partly because something about my reaction to the tick bothered me. I sat in a wooden booth, sipping the last of my latte and retelling the story to my friend, Mary Alice, when it finally hit me.

“The thing is, I handled the first nine ticks, no problem. I just pulled them out, and that was it.” I slapped my hand against the wobbly table for emphasis. “But then with the last one, Blake was there, and I was flailing around like an idiot. All the sudden I couldn’t handle it.”

Mary Alice nodded, pulling the bent arm of her eyeglasses away from her lips, then tapping the air with the frames as she said, “It’s funny, isn’t it, and kind of maddening, too, how we’re trained to need a man’s help when it’s there.” She folded and unfolded the frames. “We can get along perfectly fine—you can, I mean, you use power tools and you were strong when Blake was gone—and then a man shows up and all the sudden we’re asking for help as if we can’t do anything for ourselves.”

“You know, you’re right,” I said. I couldn’t believe it. I leaned forward, my back hunched and chest resting against the table edge. “That’s exactly it. I was playing the damsel in distress.” I shook my head, “But I don’t do that, do I? I mean, that’s not who I am—a damsel in distress.”

“No, you aren’t,” Mary Alice said, guarding her glasses in her purse. “But thank god. I mean, if you didn’t lose your cool once in a while, we’d have to hate you.”

After our conversation, I drove home, wondering, *Was I really playing the damsel in distress? Do I really do that?* I tried to reassure myself that I didn’t. That I was not an overly dramatic girl who always wants to be rescued. I was the girl who drove a Ford Ranger until I

had a baby and needed a family car. The girl who built furniture and shelves. The girl who packed the ground and laid her own pavers for a front patio. Not a damsel in distress.

But then again, I realized, maybe I am. As I slipped through the shadow of an overpass, I remembered the relief I'd felt in those moments of darkness so many times. Before Blake and I bought our house in Dell Rapids, we spent two months commuting together daily from Brookings to Sioux Falls, where he worked. After dropping him off, I'd backtrack to Dell Rapids, where I dropped George off at daycare, and then I'd backtrack a few more miles to Baltic, where I taught high school Spanish part time, or back to Sioux Falls again to the university where I taught Freshman Composition. Almost every evening as we made our way home, I cried. And when we passed through the shade of a shelterbelt or through the darkness of an overpass, I would savor the simplicity of solid darkness. When we emerged into the harsh light of sunset, I'd squeeze my eyes shut, releasing fat tears that raced over my cheeks, puddled at my chin, and dripped slowly down.

Sometimes George cried, too, tired of riding, fighting against the straps of his car seat. Sometimes I cried about disrespectful students, lazy students, or the challenges of balancing my two new part-time jobs. And sometimes I'd cry about the house we looked at that day—it's flawed layout, it's price, it's need for repair. Almost every day, I cried about something. I begged Blake to please call his cousin at the bank one more time to see if our loan had been approved so we could just find a house and make an offer, to call the realtor about touring another home we'd seen listed for sale. Each day, Blake squeezed my hand and reminded me that everything would be all right, that he didn't like all this driving, either, but that we'd find a place soon.

When our financing was approved, Blake suggested that we make an offer on the small two bedroom ranch with a semi-finished basement. I disagreed, explaining that it would feel just like our duplex, and that we'd outgrow it and feel the need to move within a couple of years. He explained his hope—that with the lower purchase price, maybe I could afford to cut back on work or stay at home with the kids. When we did the math, although the purchase price sounded much better than the other houses we'd looked at, the difference in monthly mortgage payments wasn't enough to make that a possibility. Still, I'd never heard Blake mention my cutting back on work or staying home. I was touched to know that he wanted me to have the option, to know that he was imagining a variety of possible futures for our family. It made me feel protected, taken care of. And as the process of buying a home continued, Blake took more of a lead in talking to the realtor, setting up appointments, and contacting the bank about financing. He did come to my rescue, in his own calm, quiet way.

It reminded me, somehow, of our first house hunt, a couple days before he left for Iraq, when we spent the day searching for an apartment. I sobbed through the entire process, so much so that Blake had to do all the talking, which was his way of protecting me, providing for me. When we finally found a suitable place, I thought it was sweet that Blake said he most liked the underground parking, because then I wouldn't need to walk alone outside at night or scrape my own windows in the winter.

Both times that Blake and I searched for a house together, I was a basket case. But when I found and rented our duplex in Brookings, I did it by myself. I worried about whether or not I'd find a suitable place, and I searched incessantly until I found one, but I didn't cry. I didn't work myself into a frenzy. When there was no one there to cry to, I did just fine. I didn't need

anyone to protect me, to reassure me, to step in and make decisions. I didn't need anyone, until there was someone available.

By the time I pulled into our driveway in Dell Rapids, I'd begun to picture myself as a tick, a parasite that can live for months, years even, without a host. I could see myself, blood stores starting to run low, perched on the edge of a leaf, limbs stretched outward, senses alert, waiting for a body to pass close enough that I might climb on. I didn't need to jump or fly. Blake was home, how, close enough that if I just waited for the right moment, when I was buried under a pile of student portfolios, when I tried to light the grill but smelled propane and feared an explosion, when I faced the bulging body of a parasite, he would pass by. Then I could crawl quickly—my weight perfectly balanced over thin legs, making the invasion perfectly imperceptible--and slip my pincers into his warm flesh, then let the thick relief of blood quench my thirst, nourish my strength. The image made me shudder.

Not wanting to examine my parasite self any longer, I opened the car door, and heard Blake growling like a bear in the backyard. When I heard Addie squeal, I pictured her running away, arms above her head as she tried to steady her uneven toddler steps. George joined in the growling, and Addie squealed again.

I had told Blake many times how much I appreciated his support—the way he encouraged me to go on month-long study abroad trips, the way he encouraged me to make time to write, to drive thirty miles to meet with my writing group—but after imagining myself as a parasite, I appreciated him in a new way.

In some species, female ticks tend to engorge themselves. They swell dramatically, then reproduce, and die. Their lives are significantly shorter than the ticks that eat several, smaller

meals then let loose from their hosts, and skitter away. *As long as I don't get greedy, I thought, I have a willing host.*

Playing House

When we bought our house, we weren't looking for perfection. We couldn't afford perfection, so we closed on our house less than a week after Addie was born and began the process of ripping out pink shag carpet the next day.

The house needed remodeling. It would need at the very least a new roof, furnace, and windows within the next five to ten years, but it had three main floor bedrooms and a walk out from the kitchen to the backyard, which I imagined would make it easy to keep track of kids playing outside while I cooked, did dishes, or did school work at the kitchen table. I didn't need perfect, in fact, I loved projects.

Homemade had always seemed better to me. As a child, I wore hand sewn Easter dresses and played with a Barbie house my mother built. It was a two story ranch built from thick plywood sheets, sided with thin strips of balsa wood—a masterpiece, each nail pounded, each detail painted by my mom's freckled fingers. She colored kitchen walls with golden flowered contact paper and custom built its cabinets, flat-faced thumb tacks for drawer pulls; she hung yellow gingham curtains from dowel curtain rods supported by brass cup hooks; she crafted a fire place mantel from pressed wood, glued tiny stones to its surface to give the look of fine masonry, and warmed Barbie's home with construction-paper flames.

It was amazing to me, even as a child. I had Barbies, of course, with home-sewn clothes, but my memory of the doe-eyed dolls is generic: perfectly cast bodies with bendable legs, permanently perched on tip toes, blonde hair that started out sleek and ended up frizzy. My memory of the doll house is unique: pictures snipped from Better Homes and Gardens magazine pasted on walls; a skylight ceiling; a functional closet beneath the stairs. The house amazed me.

The screen door squealed as Blake walked in to our shell of a home. His black dress shoes stepped carefully over tools spread over the bare subfloor as he made his way back to George's bedroom where my mom and I knelt, snapping the next plank of laminate flooring into place, sliding the end into place with a tapping block.

"Looks good," he said. "Is it as easy as the flooring guy said it was?"

"Not quite," I admitted, "but we're starting to get the hang of it. Do you want to jump in and help?"

"You guys keep going," he said. "I'll watch for now, maybe jump in later." So mom and I finished the room, slowed by the cuts needed to fit pieces around the closet walls, but proud of ourselves for not miscalculating or miscutting and not wasting any planks of the flooring Blake and I had spent our savings on.

When it was time to move on to the next room—Addie's room—Blake was ready to get involved. I was glad. I enjoyed working with my mom on projects, but this was *our* house, and I wanted to build it with Blake. My mom must have had a similar feeling, because she started snapping pictures of us while Blake laid out the wide planks of dark laminate, lined up the tools I would need for each step so he could hand them to me at just the right instant. "You two work so well together," she said.

At the end of the first row, I showed Blake how to measure and mark the plank, then he carried it the chop saw set up in the garage. "So you just line the blade up and go for it," I said, standing to the side of the dust covered saw.

“You just keep cutting,” he said, backing up to make space for me. “I don’t want to mess things up.”

“Just cut on the line. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it’ll be fine.”

But he didn’t want to. “You go ahead. I’ll go get the next few pieces laid out for you.”

When we bought the laminate, Blake had seemed concerned that we could afford the flooring but not the professional installation. I told him that the guy at the flooring store said it was really slick to put in and that said if we had questions we could just call. I understood that Blake was worried we might screw it up. It was our first house—the one I had pushed for, with more square footage than the other ranch we’d considered, a finished basement with cushy carpet, perfect for a playroom, a kitchen with quality cupboards, an eat-in dining room space, and patio doors that opened up to a fenced in back yard. “The kids can play in the yard, and I’ll be able to see them from the table where I can work on my writing or the window above the kitchen sink while I cook or wash dishes,” I had argued. “We would never have to outgrow this house.” So Blake wanted it to be perfect. If it wasn’t going to be perfect, I got the impression he didn’t want to be responsible for the mess.

But through a room and a half of laminate flooring, we had maintained a good record. No screw-ups that we didn’t catch in time to fix them. I ran the saw and snapped the boards into place while Blake handed me tools, checked my measurements, and jumped in when a stubborn board required extra force. By the time mom offered to take the kids back to our house in Brookings so we could finish the room, Blake and I were almost done, having even successfully worked our way around one side of the closet door without problems.

“We’ll just finish up this room and meet you back there, then,” I told mom. “It’ll probably take an hour or so. Shouldn’t be too bad.”

It was dark outside by the time Blake and I stepped into the doorway to admire our work. He leaned against the door frame, I leaned back against him, resting my head against his cheek. “Our kids both have new floors,” I said. “Pretty good work, don’t you think? Professional enough for you?”

“I’m a little surprised, actually,” Blake said. “I think it’ll look great when we put the trim back on, get the thresholds in.” Bending down to pick up a scrap of floor padding, he added, “Lets clean this up a little bit before we leave.”

While Blake swept, I pulled black plastic spacers out from along the wall, deciding to store them on the closet shelf beside the tools we’d need to use again the next day. I grabbed the metal heating vent off the shelf, realizing we needed to put it back into place. But there was no place.

“Um, Blake, we forgot something,” I said, holding up the dark metal.

“What do you mean?” he asked, turning towards me. He saw the vent and muttered, “Shit. I’m such an idiot.” He scanned the floor, pacing under the window where we both knew the hole for the vent should be.

I laughed—a tired laugh that quickly escalates, more a desperate, disbelieving laugh than one of amusement. “We forgot to cut around the vent. Of course we did. In Addie’s room. It had to be Addie’s room.”

“I’m such an idiot,” Blake said. “I thought about it at one point—*we’ll have to cut around that hole in the floor*—and then we just kept going. Laid flooring right over it.”

Still finding the situation endlessly hilarious, I pinched the skin between my eyes. “Who needs heat, right? Our two week old baby doesn’t need heat. She’ll be fine.”

Blake nodded and sarcastically, “Oh yeah, she’ll be fine. She’s gotta be tough enough to survive in this family of idiots.”

I walked over the pristine floors to slide my arms around Blake’s wiry frame. As proud as I’d been when we stood there just minutes before, admiring our work, I actually felt closer to him, felt myself hugging him tighter after we had realized our mistake. “We *are* a couple of idiots. So, what are we gonna do?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Find the vent and cut it out somehow. But first I’m going to step outside.”

While Blake stood outside the sliding glass doors smoking a cigarette, I called my mom. She said the kids were fine, both sleeping, and asked how the floor was coming. When I told her about the vent we’d covered, she wasn’t surprised. “I noticed that before I left, actually, but I didn’t have the heart to say anything. You guys were working so hard, doing so good, I figured I’d wait until tomorrow when we could fix it.”

“So, how can we fix it?” I asked.

“I was thinking maybe just turn the heat up all the way and feel the floor. Wherever its hottest must be where the vent is.”

When Blake came back inside the house, we tried the heat plan. We heard the air rushing and the floor beneath the window in Addie’s room got slightly warm, but nothing that gave us the confidence to drill through our three thousand dollar laminate flooring. We checked the other rooms, measuring the distance between walls and vents to see if we could find a pattern to depend on. Every room was different. “If we get this wrong, we have to tear out the whole room and start over,” Blake said. “I’ll go downstairs and see if I can find the vent from down there.”

It took an hour and a half of Blake and I tapping our own Morse code—him from beneath the subfloor, me from above the laminate—and one miscommunication that left a drill hole about an inch from the corner of the vent, but eventually we got it. We celebrated by sharing a beer on the dark front porch, joking about how perfect we'd be for one of those home remodeling shows like “Renovations Gone Bad” or “In Over Your Head.” By the time we left, Addie's bedroom had heat. And a scarred floor. And a story that she'll probably be hearing for the rest of her life.

My Barbie doll house wasn't perfect, either, but that didn't occur to me until I decided to bring it to our new house for my kids to play with. My aunt helped me dig the doll house out of her attic. We carried it down a steep, narrow staircase to the back of her truck, and as we slid it over the dusty end gate, I realized the back of the house wasn't sided. Once I had planted the doll house in my garage to clean it out and update its dusty old carpet, I realized it had no bathroom. The door of the closet under the staircase, hung with suede hinges fastened with flat thumb tacks, didn't fit tight, so it always stood partly open.

When I began pulling out dusty, fleece carpet, lint and cat hair flew as glue released. Five-year-old George pointed out, “This isn't realistic, mom, because the chimney doesn't go out the roof.” He was right, of course. The house wasn't perfect or exactly realistic. I admired the way he recognized its shortcomings, but I felt the urge to explain, “It isn't realistic, but it is *real*—fashioned from scraps of fabric, fastened with silver finishing nails, dreamed up and pieced together by your grandma.” I didn't know if a child could understand the value of

creative process, even if it resulted in a flawed end product. I didn't know if he would comprehend that flaws are sometimes more realistic than perfection.

As the doll house remodeling project continued the next day, as I peeled back layers of wallpaper—the mauve and blue tones my aunt used to redecorate in the eighties for my younger cousin, the orange and gold layer of the house's original seventies décor—I discovered structural imperfections. The wall dividing the upstairs into two rooms didn't meet the ceiling, exactly. Nails stretched across a gap between the pieces of plywood. The half inch column of wood framing the kitchen door downstairs had split. Even so, the house had lasted for thirty years.

George helped me squeeze glue into loosening wood joints and watched as I pounded in new nails to secure the frame. As he planned paint colors for walls, I reminded him, “We have to get it all fixed up, make it as sturdy as we can before we move on to decorating.” I wondered how I could fix the kitchen doorway, whether or not I should extend the chimney up through the bedroom like George had suggested, and if I really needed to add a wall for a separate bathroom.

In the end, I decided not to fix the imperfections. I strengthened the house, gluing the seams and adding new nails to hold the frame tight. I supported the door frame between the kitchen and living room with a piece of corner trim, used the same to give the unfinished floor edges a cleaner look, but I ignored the measure-twice-cut-once rule and one of the pieces ended up a quarter inch short. George didn't seem to mind. “That looks good, mom. When can we paint the walls?”

“As soon as the texture I sprayed on dries,” I told him, prying open the can of steel blue paint we had used on his own bedroom walls. “That will only take a few minutes.”

While he worked on the upstairs bedroom walls, I repainted the custom-made kitchen cupboards and lined their shelves with paper that matches the accent wall at the back. I scored the

plastic backing of a carpet scrap I found in the basement to fit the doll house stairs, and then when the paint had dried, stapled it in place. I cut peel and stick tiles to fit over the kitchen and living room floors.

When we finished, Addie crawled into the kitchen, hunching her back and tucking her head down to slide in. She glanced up, saying, “Momma, c’mon,” curling her chubby fingers in an invitation. She’s still young enough to believe that I can follow her in.

Addie doesn’t understand, yet, the imperfections of the doll house or the significance of the hole in the floor of her room. But someday she will. Someday George will point out that her doll house chimney doesn’t extend up to the roof and that there is no bathroom, or maybe she’ll discover it for herself. Maybe the doll house will last another thirty years, and my children will redecorate it for their own kids. By then, the house will be more flawed than ever, will require more work than it does even now. They’ll discover together that I didn’t cut the tiles exactly and had to piece slivers along the edge to make the flooring meet the wall. Maybe they will link those imperfections up to the ones they have lived with their whole lives—the hole in Addie’s bedroom floor, the creak of baseboards in our hallway that could have been avoided if Blake and I had added a few screws before we laid laminate over the subfloor. They will have gaps to fill, but I trust that they will have the stories they need to make the picture complete. But by then they’ll be able to redecorate the house themselves. George has already suggested that we could fit a toilet and a shower in the closet under the stairs, and he’s right. We can make it work.

The Shape of Memory

“You make a ball?” The words bloom from my daughter’s pixie lips, her tone rising to transform statement into question. Her eyes are shimmering seas, stretched as wide as her two-year-old vowels, which threaten to swallow up consonants. She leans forward, angling her gaze up at her Great-grandma Evie, and nods to clarify—her question is also a demand. She repeats the words, tone falling this time as her head bobs up and down. “You make a ball.”

“Sure, I’ll make a ball,” Grandma Evie agrees, accepting a pinch of playdough from Addie, then glancing across the dining room table at me. She smiles slightly, a combination of amusement and disbelief, as if she can’t believe this toddler’s audacity, as if she’s unsure about giving in to these demands so easily. But she sets to work, studying her hands as they scissor, palm to palm, thin skin whistling as she spins balls that range in size and color from grape to apricot. The task isn’t exactly easy for a ninety year old. Her body rocks, fine gray hair flipping forward and back as she works.

Grandma’s concentration breaks—only for a moment—each time Addie hands her a new segment of soft dough and a reminder: “Geat Gamma, you make another one.” She falters, fingers fumbling for a moment as she ponders the smooth ball in one hand, the misshapen lump in the other, but Addie points to the row of balls lined up like a child’s prized rock collection along the edge of the table. “You put it right there.” Then Grandma nods and sets to work again, fixing her eyes back on the movement of her hands. I watch and wonder what she sees.

I know that my mom has implored Grandma to study those hands. When dementia sharpens Grandma’s tone, when she says things like, “Why do you keep calling me mother? You’re too old to be my child.” My mom cradles the web of bones and tendons, translucent skin

spotted with cloudy blue bruises sagging between them, and says, “Look at your hands. How old do you think you are? How old do you think your children are?” But Grandma doesn’t recognize herself in those hands, doesn’t remember their work of shredding cabbage for sauerkraut, stitching layers of fabric and batting for baby quilts, graduation gifts, and donations to Lutheran World Relief. “I don’t know,” Grandma says. Then after a pause, “I want to see my folks.” She misses or ignores my mom’s response: “Your folks have been gone for almost forty years.”

Grandma’s dementia has whittled away her memory, erasing the tragedy of two husbands’ deaths, leaving behind thin strands of memory. She dangles on a single string of identity. Remembering herself as daughter and mother, she spins, disconnected from short term memories of when she ate last or who visited her earlier in the day. The once tightly woven experiences of her life are now frayed ends. I wish I could reconnect those strands, wish I could ask, “Grandma, how did you meet Grandpa Dayton?” Or even, “Do you remember Dayton?” But for years she’s been unable to answer questions like that. For years I’ve been trying to understand Grandma’s story, but even as I’ve been trying to link together and make sense of the events of her life, she has been forgetting.

I watch the way Grandma and Addie interact, the way Addie urges Grandma to keep at her work, and I begin to imagine the playdate as a sort of relief. Addie’s insistence steady and reassuring, somehow. The task of rolling playdough balls just the right physical challenge for Grandma Evie, calling only on muscle memory. Grandma must have memorized this motor task over a lifetime of shaping dough into rolls, rolling pasty white dough for snowball cookies. But then, Addie notices something—the vacant look in Grandma’s eyes, maybe, or the unusual willingness of an adult to follow orders for almost twenty minutes—and she begins pushing.

Testing Grandma's memory, her sense of identity. "You Ava?" Addie asks suddenly, dropping the name of her cousin, another of Grandma's great-grandchildren.

"No, I'm Evie," Grandma answers.

But Addie insists. "No, you Ava."

Grandma seems to play along at first, responding, "No, I'm Evie. And who are you?"

"I Addie," my daughter asserts, nodding and patting her chest. She leans forward again to meet Grandma's eyes, as if to show Grandma just how certain she is. Then she begins again.

"You. You Ava?"

I can't help but laugh. But I am amazed, too, at the way Addie persists, the way she seems to be testing. At two years old, Addie is developing her own sense of identity. She seems to understand that identity comes from knowing the people and places around us—brother, parents, grandparents, cousins. Home, daycare, Grandma's house, Grandpa Mark's house. And she seems to be involving Grandma Evie in this process of self identification, testing Grandma's own self awareness even as she asserts her own.

I recognize myself in this circle of questions and answers. For years, stories from Grandma's past have rolled around in my mind. I have asked questions, dug for answers, and attempted to shape the pieces revealed to me into a satisfying, if incomplete, narrative. But these stories surrounding Grandpa Dayton's death, Grandma Evie's reaction to the sad event, have been more than stories to me. They have been air that I needed to breathe, to pull into myself so that I could understand my own fears, find my own ways of coping.

I remember myself, with blonde waves much like Addie's, jumping from my parents' silver Impalla almost before it came to a stop in Grandma's driveway, racing into the house with

my sister, hoping to beat her to the fridge so that I could be the one to jerk open the door and rifle past jars of homemade pickles and jelly, to pull out the prized mason jar full of sauerkraut. If I lost the race, I was left to clamor through the silverware drawer, pulling out three long-toothed forks as my sister enjoyed the satisfying pop of the mason jar's seal breaking. Regardless of who completed which part of the task, though, within minutes, my mom, sister, and I were at Grandma's shiny maple table, huddled over the jar, taking turns plunging our forks in and drawing out translucent strings of fermented cabbage.

I remember this ritual. This is not a sad story that slipped from Grandma's lips, but my own experience. A pleasant memory. One that says much about me and the type of family I come from, something of my heritage. Sauerkraut is a significant piece of our family history. But Grandma Evie doesn't even remember that she likes sauerkraut. When my mom places a small bowl of it beside her dinner plate, Grandma takes one taste, then pushes it away, saying, "Well, I don't think I care for that." She doesn't seem to remember her own mother teaching her how to salt the cabbage and leave it to ferment. She doesn't seem to remember how this food's tangy bite compliments boiled pork and potatoes. But I do. To me, this memory must hold significance, because each year I urge my mom to make sauerkraut, always with the intention of paying more attention and getting more involved in the practice so that someday my own children might experience for themselves this food, this story, this memory.

Maybe I want my kids to understand that homemade is almost always better. That the thin white imitation of sauerkraut, canned or bagged and sold in supermarkets, is shallow in flavor, has not tinged the air of a household, has not been fermented under the smooth, thin rock that Grandpa Dayton pulled from the topsoil for just that purpose.

I imagine Dayton stopping as he went through the motions of picking rock, preparing a field for planting. I picture the way a smile must have lifted his sharp features as he crumbled clumps of dirt from this rock, realizing immediately the perfection of its size and weight. He must have known it would fit perfectly over the wooden lid of a stone crock. I'm sure there were not many gifts exchanged between parents who supported their six children with income from a few acres of land, the eggs of a few chickens, and so I imagine how happy Grandpa Dayton must have been to carry the rock home to his young wife, how Grandma must have smiled and leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder as she thanked him.

Maybe I hope that if I learn the art of making sauerkraut, I will inherit this rock, pass it on to my children someday. This rock may be the only happy story I remember hearing about Grandpa Dayton, and this story is and always has been buried beneath so many sad ones that it seems secondary.

Blake doesn't want to have to tell sad stories. He told me this one night after we had been sitting in his dad's garage, drinking beer and listening to the usual exchange of hunting stories.

On our wedding day, Blake's parents were still married. In the weeks leading up to our wedding, Blake's mom had nothing but wonderful things to say about her husband—what a wonderful husband and father he'd always been, what a blessing it would be to me that Blake is so much like his dad. But in the middle of Blake's deployment to Iraq, his mom showed up at my apartment and said she was filing for divorce. It was a surprise, even though in many ways it shouldn't have been. She had already been gone for years—pursuing her nursing degree, then working as a traveling nurse, each year spending less and less time at home with her family—

and then after announcing the divorce, Blake's mom disappeared almost completely. I can count on one hand the number of times she's seen George, her first grandchild. And though she knows Addie exists, she has never seen her granddaughter.

So in the garage that night, when Mark told a hunting story that involved Blake's mom, of course it was sad. Even though the story ended with Mark getting his deer, which makes it a happy ending as far as hunting stories go, the mention of Barb's name dictated the tone. We were surrounded by the same in-progress taxidermy projects, the same piles of deer sheds that grew each year, the same boxes of ammunition that were always there. But the volume of the TV in the corner seemed much louder after the story ended, and when we left, before we had backed out of the driveway, Blake said, "I never wanna have to tell a sad story like that."

So instead of going to my parents' house, where our children were sleeping, Blake and I circled the small town of Bryant, driving past the brightly-lit gas station, the snow-filled pool, and the dark, quiet bar and movie theater, repeatedly. "It's one of those things," he explained, "where I know in my heart that we aren't like them—you aren't my mom, I'm not my dad—that we don't have to end up like that. But there are these moments when my mind starts racing. I remember Barb, how it all started with her going back to school, her spending all that time away from home, how it just kept growing, how all of a sudden she was gone." While Blake drove, I followed the flicker of our headlights over the windows of homes, the brief illumination of blank stares. I thought about interrupting, about explaining, but I needed to hear the rest of these thoughts held inside. I put my hand on his knee and waited.

"I know you aren't leaving," Blake said finally, "that that's not what you want. That that's not what this is. But part of me just panics sometimes, because it all seems a little too familiar. I just remember that whole process of Barb leaving. I know it's stupid."

“It’s not stupid at all,” I said, turning to face him. “But you’re right. We aren’t them. We’re finding ways to do it all together. I don’t have to leave. I’m studying, pursuing my writing and everything I want to without leaving. You give me space for all that. And when I’m in that space—when I spend the evening at a coffee shop writing or a month in Scotland taking writing workshops—all I want is to get back home to you and George and Addie.” I leaned across the console, circled my hand over his knee. So many of the important conversations in our life had taken place in this way—me studying Blake’s profile as he drove, him sliding his hand over mine in the moments between turns. It felt familiar and comforting.

“I know,” Blake said. “I know it’s stupid.”

“It isn’t,” I repeated. His hand fell over mine. “It’s only stupid if you don’t tell me. Because, you know, I’m sure there were times, there must have been times when your dad wanted to tell your mom . . . something. I don’t know what, but something. I don’t know what happened to them, but I know it doesn’t have to happen to us. So I’m glad you told me what you were thinking.”

“So I’ll never have to tell a story like that, right?” As he asked, he turned toward my parents’ house, a sign that he was satisfied with the conversation, that he felt confident about the answer to his question.

“Right,” I answered.

I didn’t say it because I believed we could never end up like Blake’s parents, but because I knew we didn’t have to. That we could be different, because we could listen to their stories, acknowledge the silence in between, search for or at least imagine what might be buried beneath, and make our own meaning from all of them.

Grandma has forgotten so many of her own stories. And maybe this is a blessing of sorts. Maybe it is better for a woman of her age to forget the memories that she has spent so long trying to make meaning from, because some of them just can't be explained. Maybe this is a natural or conscious act of self defense, like Grandma's reaction to Addie's insistence: after half an hour of playdough rolling and identity questioning, Grandma pushed her wheelchair away from the dining room table and began to move into the living room. "Do you need something?" my mom asked. Grandma's answer was definite: "No, I'm fine. I'm just getting away from her."

Sad stories can be exhausting. Sometimes we need to escape. But the unfinished work we leave behind creates gaps that someone else may want to fill.

I know that my children will be wealthy in terms of stories. The stories of their childhood, recorded in images and scrapbooks, and the stories of their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles passed on through storytelling. I travel to other countries and return with stories. Blake continues to reveal fragmented stories of his service in the military. And I can already see these stories beginning to take effect. George's thirst for information about other cultures, about history, is evident in his collection of foreign currency, his questions about other languages. George's pride in his dad's military service reveals itself in carefully shaded pictures that win Veteran's Day contests and the ornament he asks me to buy for our Christmas tree: a soldier down on one knee, head bowed. But I wonder how these stories will shape his identity.

At some point in his life, George will discover his dad's black boxes—the ones he shipped home from Iraq and has since opened only in search of specific documents, the ones that sit in the shadows beneath our basement stairs. Once when I asked Blake where his dog tags were, just out of curiosity, he said they were probably in one of those black boxes. He couldn't imagine that he would have thrown them away, he said, so they must be in there somewhere.

And I couldn't help but imagine George finding them one day. Maybe he and Addie will be searching those boxes together, looking for clues about their father's service in the military, and maybe they will find those silver plates marked with their father's social security number, religious preference, blood type. Will George and Addie notice these pieces of information? Will George explain to his sister that their dad wore those tags in Iraq, in case he died, in case someone needed to identify his body? Will they notice the black rubber silencers their dad bought at the PX and stretched around cold metal edges to keep the dog tags from chiming, from altering the enemy to his presence? Will they realize the significance of a soldier carrying his own dog tags home, read on the dimpled silver faces of these metal discs the important label of *survivor*? Maybe one of them will slip the beaded chain overhead and carry the tags as a source of questions and answers.

Identity is a process, a continual meaning-making, like stories. Like memory. We choose which stories we tell, sometimes the ones we bury deep. But do we realize the gaps we leave? Stories fall away as we shape our memories. We pluck out moments—individual events, conversations, feelings—and work them between our palms, smooth them out each time we tell our story. Then we line up this collection of stories, display them to others as pieces of ourselves. Sometimes others are involved in the process of shaping, sometimes we layer others' stories with ours—colors becoming layered, interwoven like fingers—and these stories become impossible to separate.

Vita

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