In a dimly lit restaurant, I stare back at the only man I’ve ever loved. It’s the end of January 2008, and this is the first time I’ve seen him in seven years. I’ve come to tell him that I still love him and to resolve some unfinished business I thought we had from when we dated in 2000 and 2001, but looking at him now, I realize that I’ve probably made a mistake.

We’re sitting at a small table in the rear of the restaurant, right off the kitchen. The tablecloths are blood red, and above us a star-shaped light fixture casts a romantic glow over our table. There are wine bottles and take-out containers and appetizers, people talking and laughing and chewing. It is a small restaurant on the outskirts of Boston, with a bowling alley in the basement, and from the staircase I can hear the blunt thuds of bowling pins knocking against each other.

We order a gourmet pizza. The waitress brings us two plates, and my ex-boyfriend—Jeremy—begins talking about Boston. He is, essentially, the same man he was seven years ago. He still has the same sense of humor that comes out during his stories, the same light-hearted air that made me fall in love with him so many years ago. His voice is still pleasant and easy to listen to, and I can remember other times spent listening to him—late-night dinners in greasy restaurants, conversations over coffee at our favorite shop in Moorhead, Minnesota, and his soft, whispering voice late at night. He has less hair now, but his face is essentially the same. There are the same blue eyes that sparkled when he got excited. There is the same wide smile, the one I’d see in my head while I laid awake thinking about him. There are the same rounded cheeks, the same neck and collar bone I used to kiss.
For the past two years, I’ve been sending Jeremy irregular drunken e-mails about still being in love with him. I rarely got replies. Yet, a few months ago, when one of his replies ended with a casual invitation to visit, it didn’t take me long to respond: How about January?

When he finishes talking, I clear my throat and, without looking at him, begin the monologue I rehearsed on the bus ride up from New York.

“Well, I wanted to . . . ,” I say, but stop mid-sentence.

I want to reach across the table, take his hands in mine, look in those beautiful eyes, and tell him everything he’s missed, particularly the long year I spent in Iraq. With vividness I haven’t experienced since returning from the war, looking at him I can recall the hot summer of 2003, the begging children who swarmed my platoon’s trucks in Baghdad, the scorpions the other soldiers and I caught and released on the Kuwaiti sand, the silly mustaches and even sillier arguments we had for twelve long months, and the men and women we were before all that happened. I want to describe the sand in Iraq, so soft at times that it felt like ash, and how it stuck to our sweat as we kicked our way across that country. I want to tell him how daunting it was being a gay man in the American military, how I’d gotten so used to hiding my sexuality from other men that now, four years after leaving the military, I have a hard time forming a meaningful relationship with another man. Mostly, I want to explain how during that year, my only saving grace—the one thing that helped me get through the war—was thinking of him. I held onto those small memories and replayed them in my head every time I put on that uniform and marched out into that desert. They all come flooding back to me now.

But what doesn’t come back, what refuses to resurface, is my love for this man. When we were dating, I loved him like I’d never loved anyone before, and I have yet to love anyone that way since. But now, that love is gone. Something happened to change that.

The candle on the table flickers and casts a shadow of his face onto the wall. From the basement, I hear the dull thud of two objects being forced into one another. Hearing those pins collide and fall onto the waxed wooden floor, I remember what it was like to have two forces at work inside me, knocking against each other, and eventually falling down. I look up at Jeremy and remember the man I was seven years ago. During my early twenties, I defined myself by two things—my sexuality and my service to my country. I was proud of one and ashamed of the other, and it took me a long time to fix because the fear I had about admitting my sexuality to myself stemmed from my association with the military. I hid who I was
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from different people in my life, thinking I could separate the two parts of my life into nice, even compartments and shift smoothly between them.

But seeing Jeremy now and being reminded of the last seven years, I realize how intertwined those two parts have become. When I think about the first time I kissed him in his dorm room in the fall of 2000, I also remember a dorm room at Fort Carson, Colorado, where I cleaned the dust from the lenses of my gas mask and watched television images of tracer rounds arching over Baghdad as the war began in 2003. When I recall my first day in the army, when I stood by myself in a camouflaged uniform that was too big and boots that weren’t shined, I also remember the first time I met other gay men and women, and the nervous energy that pulsated through my body. A trip to an Atlanta strip club with my squad after our deployment to Kosovo blurs into my first drag show where a dramatic queen touched my forearm and winked at me in a way I didn’t understand. As much as I try, I can’t pry apart those two parts of my life. It took a long year in Iraq to help me understand that.

I entered the Iraqi desert with a mission: to prove to myself—and to others—that I didn’t have to choose one or the other; I could be both—a soldier and a gay man.

I returned with so much more.