The Last Deployment

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January 20, 2003: I’m twenty-two and debating growing a beard. I’m sitting in the office of the college newspaper I work for, stroking the three-day growth on my chin. I have to time growing a beard just right, starting after drills this weekend and letting it grow until February’s drill weekend, when the National Guard will force me to shave again. Only once did the Guard allow soldiers to grow beards, and that was several years ago, to commemorate North Dakota’s one hundredth anniversary, and I don’t think they’ll make another exception.

I am only six months away from getting out of the Guard, and I’m tired of it all. I’m tired of putting on that uniform and doing field exercises in some cow-shit pasture in southern North Dakota as it dumps rain and snow around me. I’m sick of standing in rank and taking orders, and I would live happy if I never again had to clean another rifle or shine another goddamn combat boot. Generally, I’m tired of being a weekend warrior. But I’ll tough it out, for another six months anyway. I made a commitment and I intend to follow through with it.

When my cell phone rings I don’t think about answering. It’s the middle of the afternoon, and I’m thinking about an upcoming English essay, this week’s issue of the school newspaper, and a college photographer I’ve had a crush on for two years. But when I check my messages and find my squad leader saying, Pack your bags, we’re being deployed, I let out a loud, sharp fuck, and all those thoughts disappear.

I need to report to the armory in Wahpeton, North Dakota, in four days.

I’m probably the last person anyone expected to join the military. But I needed something to get me out of North Dakota, something that would
help me figure out who I was, and the army just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

In high school, while my friends were picking up pamphlets from colleges and universities, I brought home several brochures about the Army National Guard. I figured the National Guard would be a good way to ease into the soldiering life. *Army-lite*, I called it, *all the perks but only half the grueling labor*. The brochures sat on my desk for nearly two weeks before I picked them up, looked through them, and called the recruiter. On a summer evening in late August 1997, a recruiter pulled up in front of my parents’ house with papers in hand.

I remember most of the details but very little about what I was feeling. My father sat at our dining room table rubbing his hands together as I watched the recruiter cross our front lawn and approach our garage door. He wasn’t a big man. He didn’t look tough, like the men I’d seen crawling through mud in the commercials, or the Marines cutting up dragons in between episodes of *Growing Pains* and *Saved by the Bell*. He didn’t look like my father or my classmate’s father, who visited our fifth grade class after he’d returned from Desert Storm. This recruiter didn’t look like anyone’s father. He looked like someone’s older brother, someone you’d ask to buy you beer. He was a young man in his twenties, dressed in an olive green, class A uniform with medals pinned to his chest, holding a briefcase and ringing our doorbell.

My mother welcomed him inside and offered him a seat at our table. He nodded at my father, shook my hand, and sat down. My mother offered him something to drink. She looked nervous; my father looked excited. I sat at the table, numb from all the information and questions that were flying across the table. I simply sat back and let my parents do all the talking. They took turns asking the recruiter questions. The recruiter flipped through some papers and passed a brochure about the Guard across the table to me. It explained how I’d have to attend drills one weekend a month, fifty miles north in Rugby, North Dakota, until I graduated from high school and moved to Fargo to attend college. Then I’d start drilling with an engineer unit in Fargo—the 142nd Engineers. The recruiter also talked about summer camp—annual two-week training sessions where troops train at military installations across the state and practice their military craft. My father nodded his head and asked the recruiter about deployments. I figured I’d have to help with sandbagging during flooding or provide security during a state emergency, but I thought I’d never leave the United States in my uniform.
The National Guard really only gets deployed during times of war, the recruiter said. I thought about that statement and about what I already knew about our last war—Desert Storm. It was a short war, and if I were to get deployed, I imagined it would be a lot like Desert Storm—brief.

The recruiter talked about the benefits—the G.I. Bill and money for college. I joined the National Guard for the money, and I have no problem admitting that. I didn’t join because my father wanted me to or because military service ran in my family. The only family member I knew who served in the military was my middle-aged, beer-gutted, bus-driving uncle. I didn’t join out of patriotism or a need to serve my country. I didn’t join to provide my five younger siblings with a role model to look up to or to show my friends how noble and strong I was. I joined because I wanted a college education. I am the oldest of six children, and my parents didn’t have the money to put all of us through college.

It happened so quickly. This decision, the one concerning my future, went by in a flash. Before I knew it, my father was shaking the recruiter’s hand as he walked him to the door. My mother was holding the desk calendar the recruiter had given her—Here’s some shitty calendar with the National Guard logo stamped on it in exchange for your firstborn child—and she was smiling. I remember looking at her and wondering how so much was decided in such a short time. Did I make this decision or did my parents?

My emotions didn’t catch up with me until a few days later. During the following week, I thought a lot about my decision to join the National Guard. I thought about what I was getting myself into and how my friends would react when I told them what I’d done. I thought about how proud my father looked at the end of the table while I was talking to the recruiter. He didn’t have to say anything. I knew that he was stepping back and letting me learn my own lessons. He didn’t have to tell me that I was making a mistake; if that was the case, he knew I’d figure that out myself.

When I saw the recruiter’s car pull up to my high school, I thought about running. I thought about grabbing my school bag and running the two blocks to my house, where I’d lock myself inside my closet and pretend I never shook the recruiter’s hand. It was instinct; whenever something hard came along, my mind always told me to run. Mostly, it had to do with being gay in a culture that didn’t understand what that meant. I felt it was much easier to run than to face any of my fears—the fear of admitting my sexuality to my family, to my friends, and most importantly, to myself. Instead, I decided to train myself to run long distances, to outrun any
obstacle that came my way, to endure. When it came time, I could run for hours and never get tired.

But there was always something else preventing me from running, some other fear that ran parallel to that of admitting my sexuality: the fear of disappointing the people I loved. I thought about how upset my father would be if I didn’t join the military. I didn’t want to feel the shame of turning back on a decision, of not following through with my commitments. This fear usually won out.

When I opened the door to the recruiter’s car and slid into the passenger seat, I felt power surge through me. I knew I was making the right decision.

My transformation from student to soldier starts almost immediately. Outside the campus bookstore, where I’ve just returned my textbooks, I run into an old friend whom I haven’t seen in almost a year. We exchange hellos. I ask him how school is going, and he asks me the same. I don’t tell him about the deployment call or that I’d just returned all my books and was headed to the registrar’s office to drop all my classes. I don’t tell him that I’d been packing the previous night, stuffing uniforms into olive-drab duffel bags, and selecting the CDs I wanted to take on the deployment. I don’t tell him that my mother almost cried when I told her the news. Instead, I say nothing. The deployment almost seems like a dream. Everything is happening too quickly for me to even think about what it means. I stare back at him and refuse to accept that my life is about to change.

Another friend stops me in the school courtyard to state that he didn’t even know I was a member of the military. The news of the deployment makes me realize the double life I am living. I am a full-time college student and a one-weekend-a-month soldier, and I like it that way. For the past five and a half years I’ve worked to hide different sides of my life from different people. I hid the military part of my life because I feared that I had made a horrible decision when I joined the National Guard. When I told my boss at the local newspaper where I write obituaries that I was leaving for war at the end of the week, she just looked back at me in amazement, shocked that the man she’d been working with for two years was also a weekend warrior. I felt like a spy who’d been forced to reveal his secret identity.

“I’ve managed to hide it well,” I say.

After I tell my friend that I am a carpenter, a profession I am horrible at, he says, “Like Jesus.”

Yes, I think. Just like Jesus.
I am an outsider among these men. When I show up for our first formation after the call to duty, I watch the men form the ranks and am flooded with memories of what it’s like to be among these guys.

Most of the people in the company are familiar with military deployments. I recognize the looks on other soldiers’ faces; it is the same look I’d shared with them a little over three years ago. I was nineteen, a year into my enlistment, and a college freshman when my company was deployed to Kosovo in 2000. I went from writing English essays about animal cruelty and flipping burgers at an A&W to handing out school supplies at underprivileged schools in the former Yugoslavia providence and building bunkers at Camp Bondsteel. I spent seven months not thinking about college exams, beer kegs, or fraternities, but rather how to communicate with the people of Kosovo and how not to let the M249 machine gun bang into my thighs when I carried it around that country.

My fondest memory of Kosovo was our weekly Risk game. Elijah, a new soldier in our company, drew the Risk game board on a white flour-sack towel and packed the plastic rectangles of game pieces inside his duffle bag. We met weekly to battle over Oceania (all the purple-colored countries), form alliances against one another, and take each other out with the cunning use of strategy. It felt good being a little dictator around the board, playing general as I ordered my men into battle against the enemy. At the end of the deployment, on our last game night, we held a championship game. The winner took home a wooden plaque we’d commissioned a local craftsman to create. We snapped photos, smoked cigars, and laughed at the time we had spent together. I remember these meetings now because this is what I wish being in the military was like. I wish war could be approached with such glee and good humor, as it was those nights in Kosovo. But it’s not. War is never as simple as rolling dice, and I don’t think I’ll ever be as close to a group of men as I was then.

I watch the other men fall into rank, and before joining them, I step back and look at the group. I am on the fringe, watching from the outside but never fully feeling part of the game. They are down-and-dirty type men. They like guns, talking about cars, ogling women in Maxim Magazine, spitting chewing tobacco into liter bottles, and reading U.S. Army Field Guides. They are blue-collar workers, men who have grease on their hands and black-and-blue fingernails from the missed swings of a hammer. They are the kind of men who have tiny calendars of topless women under the visors of their trucks, and racks for their guns along their truck’s back window. They are drop-everything-for-opening-deer-hunting-weekend
men, men like my grandfather, my uncle, my brothers, and my father. I like to go to the theater, study Latin, talk about art, and read Emerson, Hemingway, Thoreau, and Erdrich. I am more interested in academics, the way words form on the page and fall from the tongue, more in tune with music and artistic expression than turkey calls or how a shotgun sounds, but somehow, I find myself among these men.

When I hear the command calling the company to attention, I think about where I am, how I even got here, how I managed to find myself in the second squad of a military platoon about to be informed that we are headed to war. Mostly, I start to think about how I can get myself out of this situation.

The U.S. military has a policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” where as long as I don’t speak about being gay, nobody can ask me about it, and I can serve my country. During the first three years of my enlistment, I hid who I was in order to fit in, in order not to feel like such an outsider. On drill weekends I sat alone and eavesdropped on conversations about drunken bar fights and angry girlfriends. I listened but never spoke up. Instead, I adopted a silent persona. When people asked about the woman I was living with, I let them assume that I was “shacking up with a female,” as they put it, for my own safety and well-being. I never corrected them or told them that we were simply friends. And it worked. I felt a sort of kinship with the men and women who’d shared the Kosovo experience with me.

But eventually, as the years went by, I became sullen and distant. I sat alone, grumbled angrily to myself about the military and my desire to get out. I didn’t put much effort into drill weekends because I felt disgruntled at the bad decision I had made to join the Guard, and the people I used to feel comfortable around either left or stopped talking to me altogether. My only salvation was knowing that I could turn the army off like a light switch. At the end of the weekend, when that uniform came off, I went back to being the person I was comfortable being, someone who didn’t and couldn’t fit in with the army.

Now, three years after the Kosovo deployment, the part of my life I wanted to leave behind was about to become my only life. For five and a half years, I took turns flipping that switch, alternating over and over, and that was about to end.

There are muddy bootprints up and down the hall. As soldiers move about the building, they track the late January melting snow inside, their footprints like stamps of places they’ve been. The tracks look almost comical,
like the black dotted line in the *Family Circus* comic strip that shows were Billy’s been in the neighborhood. The muddy prints start at the doors and circle around the maze of hallways. They snake down one hallway, up another, and out across the gym floor. Some trail off; some double back. Some are large and dark, others small and lopsided. They are the footprints of the men and women of Bravo Company of the 142nd Engineers. They are the mark of soldiers on the move, troops preparing for their mission as they haul equipment and luggage through the building’s gymnasium and to the back loading dock where it will be placed into trucks and driven to Fort Carson, Colorado.

I am not helping load equipment. I am being punished by mopping up the tracks. This morning I awoke at a quarter after eight, fifteen minutes after I was supposed to be standing in formation at an armory sixty miles away. As I dressed in my uniform, found my car keys, and started the drive south, I threw a tantrum of curse words. I cursed my alarm for not waking me, my car for not going fast enough, my parents for letting me join the military, every damn person in my company, and the people who set this deployment in motion. I was frustrated and tired from a week of packing and preparing, and being late only made it worse.

When I arrived at the armory nearly two hours late, I was berated with comments from people thinking I’d run off to Canada. The first sergeant handed me a mop and bucket of water, pointed down the halls, and instructed me to clean up the company’s mess. I didn’t ask any questions. Instead, I hung my head and went to work.

I lean on the mop and look down the hall at the line of tracks leading to the back door. Swinging the mop left, then right, I make the footprints disappear, wishing everything was this easy to erase. I wish with a flick of my wrist I could wipe away war, conflict, poverty, get rid of all the muddy footprints in the world. Like playing general during Risk, where I’m about to send troops into battle by moving them forward, I wish I had the power to play such a Godlike role. But I am a simple soldier. I don’t have the power to change anything, and standing in my camouflaged uniform mopping floors, I can only listen to orders and do what I am told.

I laugh and shrug when other soldiers walk by. They point at me and say things like *Now don’t you wish you’d run off to Canada?* I do regret not running away to Canada, but as I lift the mop from the bucket and squeeze out the water, I know that I could never run away from the commitment I made to my country, to this organization. I signed up for this.
When I’ve finished mopping up the tracks, I find Elijah sitting by himself on the back dock, inventorizing the contents of one of our platoon’s toolboxes. Elijah is a police officer in Hillsboro, North Dakota. He is short and stocky, with dark hair and glasses. I like talking to him because we both have a fondness for movies and pop culture, even though Elijah leans a little too heavily into the sci-fi realm. His wife, Lisa, used to be a soldier. She was a member of Bravo Company before he was, and when the company was deployed to Kosovo, she asked the company commander to let her husband transfer in so he could spend seven months keeping the peace beside her. She got her wish. Shortly after we returned, she left the company with dreams of raising a family. She was pregnant with their first child.

The dock is littered with different equipment and toolboxes. There are boxes for the power tools and table saws for the carpenters, plumbing kits for the plumbers, ladders for the electricians. Outside, I notice other members of the platoon lining up the trucks. We’ve spent the last couple of days getting ready, and on Tuesday we’ll drive our trucks and equipment down to Fort Carson. I crouch down, grab one of the hammers, and start flipping it into the air, catching it again by the handle.

“I helped move all this crap down here two weeks ago,” I say.

In between the semesters, I had helped move my platoon’s equipment from an armory in Fargo down to the newly constructed one in Wahpeton. It was an easy job. But during that time there was talk of an upcoming deployment, talk that the United States was going to invade Iraq and force Saddam from the country. I didn’t believe in the necessity of another war. I’ve never felt very political, but when talk of an impending war started to spread, I was strongly against it. It was talk that made me nervous because I was close to having my enlistment expire and kissing the army goodbye, and I didn’t want to be forced to stick around just because George W. Bush wanted war.

“Well,” Elijah responds, “at least all our equipment is here and not up in Fargo.”

He smiles and continues checking off items on his list. He reaches for the hammer in my hand and I give it to him. I help him finish inventorizing the toolbox, helping count the tape measures, drill bits, levels, tool belts, and other items. He closes the box, moves to one side, and gestures for me to grab the other handle. We lift and carry it across the bay, placing it in a pile of inventoried and ready-to-load items.

“So,” Elijah says as we walk across the bay, “the last rodeo, huh?”

Kosovo was my first rodeo—my first deployment—and as everyone in
the platoon knows of my desire to leave the military, they all know that this
deployment will be my last hurrah.

I nod my head.

“Well, we better make it a good one then.”

He slaps me on the shoulder as we walk to the locker room, where the
rest of the platoon are emptying their lockers and inventorying their
personal belongings. Once there, Newman hands me a packing list and
several copies of my orders.

I watch the rest of the company pack their gear. I watch uniforms being
stuffed into duffle bags. Some of the younger soldiers are having a hard
time packing, and Elijah and Newman are helping them properly stuff
t heir gear in order to save room. I notice brown army-issue T-shirts strewn
across the floor, mittens tossed aside. There is some debate as to whether
we should take cold-weather items such as scarves and insulated combat
boots. Most people want to leave the items behind but Newman tells us to
pack nearly everything. We’ll decide what we need and don’t need once we’re
in Fort Carson, he says. I look around the room at the people I’ll be spending
this deployment with. I hardly know most of them. They aren’t like my
friends outside the military. They talk and laugh, help each other check off
items on packing lists, and close the padlocks on their stuffed duffle bags.
While I’ve spent the last few years being angry at the military, they were
busy forming bonds and friendships. There is camaraderie in watching
these men pack. I see it floating around the room but I can’t feel it. I’m
scared because so much of what goes on in war involves trusting the man
standing next to you. Yet how can the United States have an armed force
that’s based on trust and support if there’s also a policy built on secrecy
and lies? How can I stand next to these men—packing for war—and feel
comfortable among their ranks? I haven’t done anything except be myself,
and now that decision is coming back to bite me in the ass.

That night, I stand in front of a full-length mirror and take a good, long
look at the man staring back. I am still wearing my camouflaged BDU
(battle dress uniform) after a long day of packing. My boots are all scuffed
up and dull. I look ragged and disheveled, like a different man. But if I
squint hard enough, I can still see the man I want to see underneath all this
camouflage.

I can still see the teenager wanting to get away, yet now he’s gotten all
he’s wanted out of the military and he wants nothing more than to be free
from it. I see the college student who used to go to classes, listen to lectures,
and wake up each morning excited about learning a profession he likes instead of pounding nails and measuring two-by-fours. I see a gay man who wants to believe that the military has changed, that in the modern military he can serve next to any other man and not be treated any differently because of whom he sleeps with. And I see a man who’s still afraid, even after so many years of putting up his defenses, of thickening his skin so nobody ever knows who he really is.

I start to strip off the uniform piece by piece. The boots fall haphazardly onto the carpet, one slung across the other, the laces tangled together. The shirt and trousers make a pile in the middle of my bedroom floor. I fling aside the beret and the sand-colored T-shirt. Standing there in just my underwear, I am reminded of how it felt during my first year in the National Guard, when I was still new and different. I had yet to build up a dislike for the long weekend drills and the monotonous actions of the military. Both inside and out of the military, I was still finding my legs, figuring out who I wanted to be, where I fit in. Now, years later, I’m nothing but a jaded twenty-something who’s angry at the world and the decisions he’s made.

I know that once I leave this apartment I won’t be coming back the same person, and that scares the shit out of me. *I like who I am*, I think. *I don’t need to change, and I don’t need some stupid war to tell me who I am.*

In the spring of 2000, we ran in the hills of Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, almost every day. Usually, we ran as a company—one large formation of soldiers running in four ranks. We all wore the same outfit—gray sweatpants and sweatshirts with ARMY printed boldly across our chests. As we breathed in the mountain air, we trudged up and down the little hills along the road, our shoes dunking into and out of the puddles as we went along. It was a team effort, but if you weren’t strong enough to keep up, the platoon would leave you behind, forcing you to motivate yourself to catch up or give in and walk the gravel road home, alone. The stronger runners would leapfrog the weaker runners, kicking up mud as they passed and forcing the weaker runners to fall back to the rear of the formation. Slowly they would drop out of the formation, like pieces of cheese crumbling away from the larger block.

I usually ran somewhere in the middle, not the strongest runner in the platoon but not the weakest either. If I felt particularly motivated, I’d run faster and move to the front of the pack. If I felt lazy and lethargic, I stuck to a steady pace in the middle, content with being average. But I never fell to the back of the formation. I never wanted to feel like I was being left behind.
Last Supper

As the majority of the platoon completed the cool-down exercises after the run, we’d see the weaker runners walking the last hill, looking small and defeated, until they reached the formation and sheepishly snuck into one of the ranks in the rear. The legs of their sweatpants were usually covered in mud; the whole calf area would be brown. They not only took on the mud from their own running, but they also accumulated mud from other runners passing them by. After the exercises, we’d walk back to the wooden SEA (Southeast Asia) huts we called home, shower, and prepare for the day. Rarely did anyone say anything about the weaker runners, but we all thought about them. We all knew who couldn’t keep up with the group because we liked to keep tabs on the weakest links.

As I prepare for the deployment, it is this image of the mud-soaked runners that sticks in my mind. I could quit. I could tell someone that I am gay and be discharged from the military. But every time I think about quitting I remember those weaker runners. All I have to do is think about them, their mud-coated sweat suits, their deflated faces, and the silent ridicule we all gave them for not keeping up. It is that fear of failure that keeps me going.

More than anything else, that fear is in the back of my head now. Keep running, it says. Keep running.

When my friends gather at a local restaurant to bid me farewell, I try not to think about it being my last meal, even though I call it that. Typically, I’ve thought of “lasts” as times for rejoicing and celebration. I remember my last week in basic training, where I could look forward to no longer having to shovel my meals into my mouth and endure screaming drill sergeants, and I remember our last game of Risk in Kosovo before heading home. The deployment—my last rodeo—will be the final hurdle I’ll have to clear, so I try to look at it in a positive way. But when you’re going off to a war you have a chance of not returning from, you think about things like last beers, last meals, and last conversations. It’s just part of human nature.

My friends are gathered around a long wooden table when I enter the restaurant. I take the only empty chair, the one at the head of the table. It looks like I’m the king at the center of his court. A couple of my friends have brought balloons, an obvious effort to cheer up the occasion. They ask about the past week of preparation, the other people in my company, how my parents are handling everything. I tell them about my mother, how part of me doesn’t want her to see me leave because I hate seeing her cry. I tell them about my silent father. It’s hard to tell if he feels proud or
afraid or what because I have a hard time reading his emotions. I am like him
in that way, always able to put on a disguise and cover up how I really feel.
I order a beer, not knowing when I’ll be able to drink alcohol again.
“You know,” one of my friends says, “we could pretend to kidnap you
if you’d like. Take you up to Canada.”
“Would I have to ride in the trunk?” I ask, laughing as I flip through
the menu.
They’ve been joking about kidnapping me all week. Each call I’ve
received is filled with ridiculous plans for getting me out of this deployment,
any attempt at keeping me free from harm. I don’t consider most of the
plans—shooting myself in the foot, actually telling them I’m gay—because
I knew that being deployed was a possibility when I signed those papers,
and I wasn’t going to back out now.
“I hear Canada is really nice this time of year,” another friend says.
“Besides, I love a road trip.”
“My parents told me that I have relatives up in the Yukon,” I say
cheerfully, thinking back to the one time my father mentioned it.
“Well, there you go. You can stay with them.”
Until now I’ve always discarded their foolish ideas of running away
from this deployment, but for once I find myself thinking about this latest
option. I think about living in the cold, northern Canadian territory, finding
work at a library, maybe teaching at an elementary school, or writing for a
local newspaper. In the winter, I’d look up at the sky and see the northern
lights, and in the summer, I’d stand outside and watch the sky stay lit all
night, and I’d be glad to live in a place that doesn’t go dark. But I’d have to
leave all the people sitting at this table. None of them would want to go
with me; they have nothing to run away from. I’d have to leave everything
I’ve come to know and understand, and as I watch my friends chat among
themselves, laugh, and listen to my best friend Beka tell one of her rambling
stories, I feel sad and thankful at the same time.
I explain to my friends that several people are probably getting married
this week—rush weddings to reap the benefit of deployed servicemen. The
television news ran several stories, and in this week’s newspaper a couple
holds hands and smiles, thankful for their time together now. My friend
Alicia jumps on the opportunity to propose.
“My grandmother has this really nice chandelier,” she says. “And the
first child to get married gets it.”
I laugh and politely decline her proposal. I don’t want to confuse people
even more. When the waitress comes to take our orders, I feel an urge to

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order the most expensive thing on the menu. I remember reading that
Timothy McVeigh’s last meal before he was executed was a pint of ice cream
and a glass of water. I go much grander than that, ordering the largest steak
in the restaurant.

At the end of the meal, when my friends have stopped talking about
kidnapping me, we pay our bills and drive a few blocks to the only gay bar
in town. It is early and the bar is nearly empty. We walk to the back and
squeeze into a red and white vinyl booth. The Chinese lanterns above the
bar seem to sparkle, and in the adjacent room I hear the thumping of
 techno music. A couple of drag queens, sipping from glass tumblers, sit
near the end of the bar. Two skinny lesbians are trying to get a pack of
cigarettes from the vending machine. My friend Ashley wants to dance.
My other friends chat with an old drunk at the bar. They order me drink
after drink, and soon I am in a comfortable state of bliss, where I don’t
have to worry about finding my way home. I am among friends, people I
care about and people who care about me, and it feels good to be loved. I
rest my head on the table and for a few moments imagine what it would be
like to never have to leave these people. I imagine that after the bar we’d get
in the car and drive north, through Grand Forks, past the U.S.–Canada
border, through Winnipeg and Saskatoon, and on to northern Canada.
We would drive all night, talking like we did the night we drove to South
Dakota to see a concert, when we learned everything about each other and
the world was loud and vibrant. Except this time, instead of South Dakota,
we’d be in the great wild Yukon. We’d make fun of the guards at the border,
exchange our dollars for loonies and toonies (one- and two-dollar Canadian
coins), buy beer at a liquor store, and throw the bottles at geese along the
marshes. We’d stop at the shadiest Canadian hotel we could find and curl
up on one large bed, warm and alive. In the morning we’d wake and repeat
that day—just that day—until I couldn’t feel that bundle of nerves rolling
around in my stomach, until my heart slowed its rapid beating, and until
the lump in my throat—the lump that first appeared the day I got that
call—disappeared.

But then the heavy reality sets in like cement weighing us down to
those vinyl seats. The room is silent. The man at the bar is gone. The jaded
queens have fallen off their stools. Ashley is tired of dancing, and everyone
wants to go home. Part of me wants to stay here, to hide, because I know
that I’m not coming back the same person. But another part of me wants
an adventure. As we rise from that booth and stumble to the door, I feel
my ghost staying behind, still sitting in that booth as the lights twinkle and
the world refuses to change, while my body pushes open the heavy door, feels the cold winter wind, and looks up to see the white peaks of the Yukon’s Gray Ridge Mountains.