The Last Deployment
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I stand next to them, but not among them. They stand rigid—black boot next to black boot—in formation on the pavement outside our barracks, listening to Captain Roar ramble on about the training and how he still hasn’t heard when they’ll be leaving. They are dressed in their camouflaged uniforms and slick black berets, hands cupped together behind their backs. They look dignified and hard like matching pawns poised along the front lines of battle.

These pawns are all I’ve known for the last month. We’ve trained together, slept in the same giant maintenance bay, eaten together, and partied together on our weekend passes. Some—like Newman, Elijah, and Lake—I’ve known for years; they were with me when we went to Kosovo three years ago. They talk at great length about their wives, their children, their mortgage payments, how the National Guard has changed. Others are new to the unit, young and naïve. They come back to base drunk from a night of dancing and pass out on their cots. We have a hard time waking them in the morning.

I’ve always felt uneasy standing next to these men and women. After returning from Kosovo and telling my friends that I was gay, I started to dread drill weekends with the National Guard. I loathed those weekends like I loathed trips to the dentist. My female friends called it my own male version of PMS because I became grumpy and angry at the thought of putting on that uniform, even if it was only for a weekend. Mostly, I fear what will happen when the soldiers in my platoon figure out what I am hiding.

But these men and women are all I have now.

It is lightly raining now and the boots around me become slick and dark. Yet my boots refuse to change. I’ve had dreams that start like this. I’ll
be standing among these men and women, dressed exactly like them, but
not. My boots will be a different color—sometimes pink, sometimes baby
blue, sometimes pea-shit green—but always different, like they’re cut from
a different cloth. However, I’ll be the only person who notices. Nobody
seems to see how much I stick out, how different I am. During inspections,
the LT will look me over like he does everyone else. He’ll ask me the same
questions. He’ll look at me with the same stern expression on his face. I’ll
look back at him like all the other soldiers, and wonder, Why doesn’t anyone
else see how out of place I am here?

Lake is far too arrogant for his own good.

Right now, he stands shivering in the doorway of a closed café. The
February wind collects under his shirt, blowing the fabric away from his
skin like an inflating balloon. The wind moves on, and the fabric falls back
against his chest. Earlier this evening, his shirt was three buttons open,
revealing his tan Native American skin to the women crowded around the
bar. He always wears his shirts this way when he goes out dancing, but now
as he shivers against the night breeze, the shirt is buttoned to his chin, his
collar popped up to cover his exposed neck.

Standing next to Lake, I smell the musky scent of his cologne and his
sweet alcoholic breath. I step out from under the awning and look up and
down the street. There are seven of us standing in T-shirts and short sleeves
under the awning. Nobody has brought along a coat, and we huddle together
for warmth, waiting for our ride. We’re on a weekend pass and have just
spent the night drinking and dancing in a half-dozen clubs in downtown
Colorado Springs. Across from us, men and women are emptying out of
the clubs, filling the icy sidewalks. The street is crowded with young people
who have places to go—all-night diners and warm apartment-beds. I look
back at Trangsrud, who has retracted his arms from the short sleeves of his
black T-shirt, making himself appear armless, and realize how much we
stick out. We have no place to go; home is 942 miles away.

I pull my arms out of the sleeves and hug my sides with my cold hands.
I sigh, looking up and down the street before stepping back into the huddle.

When King and Tuna pull up with the van, we rush to get inside.

“Where have you guys been?” Lake asks as he slides open the van door.

King turns around in the driver’s seat and smiles at us. “We went to the
strip club,” he says.

King reminds me of someone’s younger brother—not necessarily my
younger brother but somebody’s. He’s hopeful, enthusiastic, and full of
energy and drive. He’s like a messy puppy—dirty and clumsy, but also endearing and charming, in his own sloppy way. Yet King also comes across as mature for his age, more thoughtful than you’d imagine a man talking about strip clubs could be. I often see him with a book and can tell that he’s at least interested in something other than military jobs and grunt labor.

Tuna is a little more reserved. He’s married and the father of two young children. He’s the same age as I am and was a student back home. I can tell that he’s been hardened by marriage and children. He’s wiser than other soldiers his age. He’s the perfect counterpart to King—the Skipper to King’s Gilligan.

King is giddy with excitement as he tells the rest of the van about his night. February has been filled with stories like this, men operating out of lust. Every Monday morning men come back with more tales about strip clubs and bars. I quietly listen to descriptions of lap dances and how girls flung themselves around metal poles. There are descriptions of beautiful waitresses and sexy bartenders. Trangsrud never calls the waitress from the steak house. Lake makes moves on a female security guard at the gates of the base, yet fails to get her phone number. Once, when we drove away from the gates, Grayson shook his head at Lake and said, “You could’ve had that, man, you could have had that.”

When we get back to the hotel room we sit around drinking and watching Good Morning, Vietnam. Robin Williams’s character is trying to befriend Vietnamese women. I think about my own attempts at making a connection to the men in my platoon. I’ve tried to adapt to my surroundings, to take on some of the traits of these men. When I went to South Korea for two weeks with the National Guard in 1999, I remember stopping at a number of bars and strip clubs outside the military bases. While the other men bought drinks and talked with the women who slid up next to them, I buried my nose in a newspaper, nervous and out of place, afraid to talk to anyone. The other guys yelled at me for ignoring the women, for reading the newspaper, for just generally being a nervous fool. I was eighteen, gay, and in over my head. I didn’t know what else to do.

What I learned to do was adapt, to change my skin to fit in with the men around me. When we returned from Kosovo in 2000, we spent a week in Fort Benning, Georgia. One night my squad decided to go to a strip club. I was then nineteen and hardened from eight months of keeping the peace in a war-torn country, so when I showed another man’s ID to the bouncer outside the club, the bouncer just handed it back and let me pass. I looked like all the other young soldiers. I appeared older than I really was,
something the military had done to me, and I think the bouncer could tell. I sat among the men, like I was no different, and watched the women dance around silver poles.

Now, I’m surrounded by seven other men, in a hotel suite living room no bigger than my old apartment bedroom, and I think that this is what it’s like to fit in. Some people say that military units function like families. When you’re living closely with thirty-some other men you can’t help but bond like family does. Like any typical family, members start to take on roles. Squad leaders alternately become mothers and fathers, asking soldiers in their squad if they have all their gear for the upcoming mission and punishing them with push-ups if they do not. The man standing next to you becomes your brother, the woman your sister. There is always the rebellious teenager who refuses to take orders, and the slow cousin who simply can’t comprehend what the lieutenants say.

I look around the room and think for a second that we are a family, all camped out around a room like children on Christmas night. King is asleep on the floor to the left of the bed, Tuna on the right. Someone has passed out on the chair, and a couple of people are sleeping on the carpet at the foot of the bed. Only Lake is absent, sleeping alone on the king-sized bed in the next room, because he paid for that luxury himself.

I’ve never referred to the members of my platoon as family. Instead, I’ve compared them to a kindergarten class. Many members of my platoon are young kids, men in their early- to mid-twenties, college students who are more used to holding a beer can than a rifle. We’re men who’ve been raised on Chris Farley movies, WWF wrestling, Zubaz, and grunge music. We are men still trying to figure out who we are, most of us confused at the new responsibilities that come with wearing the military uniform. Mostly, we think we don’t have to change, that like stubborn kindergarteners who refuse to learn, we don’t need to accept the responsibilities that have been placed in front of us. We’re living in limbo between a past we can’t return to and a future we refuse to accept.

In the morning, Lake comes out of his room and stands stretching in the doorway. He rubs his eyes and looks around at the rest of us still waking from the night.

“Jesus Christ,” he says plugging his nose. “It smells like eight people slept in here last night.”

We continue to prepare for a deployment to an unknown destination. We conduct a number of field exercises in the snow. We return to the rifle
range. We do a land navigation course in the foothills and joke about getting lost in the desert. Mostly, we get anxious about leaving Fort Carson and actually doing something productive. The lack of activity during the day drives us into gossiping. As the days progress with no orders saying we’re headed to Turkey, the rumor mill again grinds. Newman overhears Captain Roar talking about a newspaper back home reporting we’ll be in Fort Carson for six months. Trangsrud says that he talked with a soldier in the Triple Nickel who said that if we don’t deploy to Turkey we’ll head to Kuwait like everyone else. One rumor even says that in three weeks we’ll find out our fate—going overseas or going home.

I’ve dreaded this deployment from the day I got that call to duty, but now, after wasting nearly a month in Colorado, there’s part of me that wants a war, a small sliver of my mind that wants to be a part of something momentous. I want a war that will justify so many people being uprooted from their lives and thrust into action. I need this war to happen.

One afternoon I watch Fredricks admire the diamond engagement ring he’s bought for his girlfriend. Fredricks is new to the platoon, but he fits in like he’s always belonged. He was a college student at North Dakota State University before we left. He has a blonde girlfriend he admires and constantly talks about. He tells off-color, tasteless jokes like the rest of the men in the platoon—jokes about dead babies and prostitutes. But he can also be witty and charming, and I’m instantly drawn to how personable the guy is, how comfortable I feel around him. When he smiles his perfect country boy smile—wide and white—he makes you almost forget you’re in the army, cleaning your rifle, or that you’re angry about the uncertainty of your mission. It all just seems to melt away.

I watch Fredricks pick up the black box, flip open the top, and stare into the million eyes of the diamond, almost mesmerized by it. I imagine that he is thinking about his girlfriend every time he smiles, or what she’ll say when he pops the question after she drives down to see him. I smile because he is smiling, and watch as he stuffs the ring back inside his duffle bag.

Fredricks isn’t the only person holding onto the past and thinking about the future. Elijah is having a hard time being away from his wife, who is due with their first child. One afternoon, while waiting around our bay, he sits down next to me on my cot. I close Catch-22 and look over at him.

“You alright?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he says. He rubs his hands together and looks down at his boots.
We get into the details of the deployment, our frustrations about being at the military’s mercy, and the latest rumors buzzing around the bay. Finally, I ask him about Lisa, his wife, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. He’s hunched over on my cot, his head cupped in his hands. He looks over at me and I see tears in his eyes.

“I just want to be there for the birth,” he says. “I don’t care where I have to go or for how long, but all I want is to be back for the birth. That’s all I want.”

We’ve all been feeling the stress of being away from home. The battalion has started giving us the weekends off, and several of the wives, girlfriends, and family members have started carpooling down to Colorado Springs. Fredrick’s girlfriend is coming down this weekend, and Newman and Grayson’s wives have talked about riding together to come down to see their men.

While some of the soldiers reminisce about wives and girlfriends back home, we single men go into bars and clubs and wash away our loneliness with alcohol. Lake and I go to bars in downtown Colorado Springs to discuss military promotions. We’re both specialists, and since we don’t have girlfriends or wives to fret over, in between rounds of drinks we talk about passed-over promotions and missed opportunities to become sergeants. Lake has been passed up for a promotion a couple of times now, and I passed up the opportunity to attend sergeant training because I knew I was getting out of the army. We both hold to the notion that in the military there are always far too many chiefs trying to take charge. Sometimes, Lake likes to argue, it’s better to just sit back and let everything work itself out. It’s a sort of “Let it be” mentality that we’ve adopted and call our own. We call it “The Specialist’s Creed.”

“But it will never happen,” Lake says before taking a swig from his beer. “That’s the irony of this situation. Those clowns we call the leadership will never step aside and let the situation play out. They’ll continue to fuck things up for all of us.”

On February 28, after nearly a month in Fort Carson, I sit in our bay and watch the men around me. Fredrick is holding his jewelry box and grinning ear to ear. Ivy, a Gulf War veteran who works in construction back home, is telling stories about the kangaroo rats he saw his first time over in the desert. Some of the men are napping; others are playing cards. Tangaard is listening to music on his Discman and bobbing his head to the beat. Tuna is writing a letter with a pen that says Daddy on the side. Newman sits in one corner reading from a newspaper. They all have different means of...
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coping with this deployment, different ways of taking their minds off the situation, and my way of dealing with all this is to watch them.

Newman looks up from his newspaper and announces to the group that Mr. Rogers has died.

“He was a sniper in Vietnam, you know,” Newman says.

I’ve heard this tall tale before and know it isn’t true. Mr. Rogers never served in Vietnam. Sometime over the years someone started the rumor that Mr. Rogers was in the Navy SEALS and had a number of confirmed kills. But I knew Mr. Rogers wasn’t a vet and never served in the military. I’d looked it up the first time I heard it.

I shake my head and laugh. This is how rumors get started.

I fondly remember reenacting scenes from the television show Tour of Duty on my grandparents’ small farm. My youngest aunt, Wendy, was more like an older sibling than an aunt, and when my parents dropped my two brothers, my sister, and me off at my grandparents’ house, we’d spend hours watching episodes taped from television and casting our own private Vietnam in the backyard.

Wendy played the young lieutenant and led us into the patch of woods behind the house. We pretended to hear gunfire off in the distance, and every now and then we’d twist around as if the Vietcong were in those trees trying to pick us off. We even took prisoners, usually my brother Bo and my sister. Wendy put them inside the tiny shed at the edge of the woods, as if they’d been captured by the Vietcong, and then she led a recon mission to rescue them.

My brothers and I were typical American boys. We liked destruction, violence, guns, and blowing things up. We liked getting dirty, playing dirty, and pretending to go to war. Wendy was a tomboy who, like my sister, took pleasure in hanging out with the boys. She didn’t have dolls or tea sets. She was one of the boys during those summers on the farm, pretending to be an American soldier traipsing through a Vietnam jungle that looked a lot like a farmyard shelterbelt. She managed to fit in right alongside us.

But as boys turn into men they lose interest in destruction, warfare, and violence, or at least I did. I grew out of these things and eventually forgot about Tour of Duty. I became fascinated by much more than just action. When I joined the military I found myself among the boys again, men who didn’t grow out of these childhood obsessions, and I didn’t really know what to do.
At the end of February I find myself standing on the demolition range in the foothills of Fort Carson, helping my platoon put together Bangalore torpedoes. And I am again fascinated with destruction.

Standing in the snow, members of the platoon hold four metal fence posts and enough C4 plastic explosive to blow a dog house to bits. We’re combat engineers and the Bangalore torpedo can be our best friend. The torpedo is used to clear obstacles. We’re putting together a “field-expedient” version of the torpedo by filling the concave portion of a fence post with C4. I watch as Lake and Newman put one of the two torpedoes together. Once the task is completed we stick the torpedoes into the concertina wire fence—our obstacle—and watch as the demolition sergeant sticks the charge into the C4. As he uncoils the detonation wire, he looks over and hands me the spool.

Watching the construction of the torpedo, I realize how completely sheltered my life has been up to this point. I never get to do these kinds of things outside of the military, so I find myself excited when the sergeant hands me the spool of wire and points up the hill. It is my chance to prove that I belong among these men, that I fit in here even though everything about my life outside the military says I do not.

The rest of the platoon marches up the bunker at the top of the hill. I follow them, unwinding the wire and watching as the cord falls into the snow. Once at the top, I crouch behind the bunker and, with the help of the demolition sergeant, attach the detonator to the end of the wire. I feel the detonator in my hand, the metal cold against my skin. I think about all the times I felt like an outsider among these people, how worthless and uneasy I’ve been wearing this uniform. I run my fingers around the pin at the side of the detonator, and when the sergeant counts me down, I pull the pin with my index finger and hear the explosion at the bottom of the hill. As I rise from behind the bunker, I get an odd feeling in my stomach, a strange and eerie sensation of enjoying pulling that pin a little too much.

When the war begins on March 19, I am alone, watching American Idol on a three-inch television screen. It was the announcement from President Bush two days earlier that sent shivers through my body. Bush gave Saddam Hussein and his sons forty-eight hours to leave Iraq. Since then, I’d been waiting to hear Bush announce that the U.S. military was launching missiles at key locations around Baghdad. They were the words I’d wanted to hear.
Sitting in silence, watching the missiles light up the Baghdad sky, I realize that I am on deck—waiting—for a war I never thought I’d be a part of. Somehow, after a month and half at Fort Carson, after days of waiting and preparing, after speeches from Captain Roar and other military officers about the importance of our upcoming mission, I’ve become fond of the idea of war. I’ve started to believe we could do some good in Iraq. We are needed in that country—to run off their hypocritical leader and to restore peace and order to a country in conflict. We are going to give this country back to the people.

All I can think about now is how I am standing in a carpeted room in Fort Carson, Colorado, doing nothing while a war is springing to life half a world away. I am missing it; I am missing my war.

I start to pace my room and wonder where my roommates are. Earlier today we’d suffered through a series of long classes on military procedures and equipment information. At the end of the day, the sergeants quizzed us on what we’d learned. The final question was: “How many trucks are there on a military post and what is inside them?” The question refers to the use of “masthead trucks” at the top of flagpoles. If a military post is overrun, the legend goes, the commanding officer is supposed to climb to the top of the post commander’s flagpole and retrieve a singular masthead truck, which contains a match, a razor, and a bullet. The officer is supposed to use the razor to cut apart the flag, and the match to burn the flag. Finally, the officer must dig up a gun buried at the base of the flagpole, place the bullet inside the gun, and send that round through his brain and out the back of his skull.

As I listened to one of the battalion sergeants explain the answer, all I could think about was 9/11, how terrorists had attacked our country. I knew better than to think we were headed to Iraq simply to give the Iraqi people a better life. I knew there was something else in our motives, something more private and justifiable. I’d heard early critics of the war on terror describe the United States as a bully, but I didn’t see us as bullies. We were doing what had to be done. We had to regain what was taken from us on 9/11—our dignity.

I lie down to sleep but my mind is racing with images of war. In my head, I dream up this scenario of what I’ll be doing this summer, this grand adventure in the Arabian Desert. I imagine sand dunes and camels, turbans, machine guns, oil fires, and sun, lots of hours under the hot, beating sun. I also start to imagine a future where I’ll return to North Dakota a worn, war veteran, where I’ll bump into old high school classmates who’ll ask me...
what I did over the summer. I’ll look blankly at them and say, *I rode a camel across an oilfield in the Iraqi desert. What did you do?*

The men fall in love with the war every morning over breakfast. In between bites of scrambled eggs and sausage, they watch the news reports for the latest information on the war. They point at the screen when the missiles fall on Saddam’s palaces. They stare at the screens filled with images from the “shock and awe” campaign, their mouths open and their eyes glazed over. They sit silently as smoke billows out of Baghdad and sigh loudly when fourteen American casualties are announced. They boo and curse at the footage of antiwar protests in Chicago and Washington, D.C., and cheer at the children jumping on Dixie Chicks CDs.

One morning I watch from the second-story window of our barracks while a few members of my platoon conduct drills with their gas masks. They take turns timing each other, seeing how long it takes them to put on their masks, starting when the timer yells *GAS! GAS! GAS!* and ending when the soldiers are pumping their arms in the air, signifying that they’re done. They train us to don and seal our gas masks in eight seconds. We used to do whole weekend drills on gas masks. We’d put them on and run around the building. We’d run laps, take our weapons apart, even put them on at night and walk around the training camp. Now, I watch the soldiers dotting the grass below the windows, their gas masks strapped to the sides of their right thighs, their left arms twitching like a gunslinger’s before a showdown. The timer yells *GAS! GAS! GAS!,* and the soldiers rip open their carriers and struggle to get the masks to their faces. They look like beekeepers once the masks are donned, a dozen zombie beekeepers wandering the barracks courtyard.

The men’s enthusiasm quickly reaches home. We take turns calling our friends and family back in North Dakota. When I call my mother to tell her that my battalion is leaving for Kuwait in a couple of weeks, she breaks down and starts bawling. Once she hears those words fall from my mouth—*Mom, we’re finally leaving the States*—she lets loose. I stand in the hallway of our barracks, where three phones have been installed, and listen to her sob violently into the phone. Next to me, Viv, one of the new members of the platoon, is telling one of his buddies about being deployed.

“Dude, can you believe it?” he says. “I’m going to war. Me. Out of all of us, I’m the one going to Kuwait. How far out is that, man?”

He spoke with a kind of enthusiasm most of the battalion felt for finally having a mission.
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Mostly, I share the men’s desire to be a part of the war. I gaze starry-eyed at the television as missiles are launched over Baghdad. I like the way the red and green tracer rounds light up the night sky. When the battalion issues sand-colored camouflaged boonie hats, I too place mine on my head and stand before a mirror, commenting at how renegade the cap looks. I imagine slap-dashed camouflage makeup across my face. I imagine a machete and my rifle, jungle vines hanging from the trees. I am Rambo or Charles Bronson, ready and angry.

But there is still something holding me back from fully trusting these men, from entirely fitting in among them. It could be that while the men are falling for the war, I am also falling for the men.

In uniform, the men all look the same. But outside that uniform, when they shed their camouflaged skin and turn into civilians again, I fall for them like I did a gray-eyed photographer during college or the British men I met in London pubs. Particularly, I’ve fallen for Fredricks and his good-ol’-boy smile.

After classes and training one day, we go down to the base bowling alley for bowling, pool, and beer. I’m not much of a bowler, and the pool tables are all occupied, so I belly up to the bar, order a beer, and sit down before a video-game machine. Fredricks sits down next to me and smiles.

“Not a bowler, huh?” he says, his awe-shucks dimples catching the little light in the bar.

“Nope,” I say.

The bar is dark and crowded. Across the chipped-up tables, near the back of the bar, the DJ is setting up karaoke equipment. Fredricks and I talk about his girlfriend, his family, and his classes. He eventually taps the video-game machine in front of us and asks what I’d like to play. We settle for some matching game, and for a few minutes we sit in silence, drinking our beers and playing the game. I watch him smile every time he gets something wrong or the way his eyebrows bunch up when he can’t figure out the game. Behind us a woman has stepped up to the karaoke microphone. She announces that the next song is for all the soldiers in the bar tonight. The bar erupts with people cheering. The song is “Love Is a Battlefield” and the woman is perfectly in tune.

As the liquor takes affect, I lower the wall I’ve managed to keep up during the deployment. Fredricks leans against the bar and watches the woman sing. I watch him. I feel entirely comfortable in his presence. I mouth the words to the song—We are strong—looking between the woman who sings and Fredricks, as if I’m the translator passing the words from her to him.
For a moment I just want to blurt out everything. A week ago, Grayson nearly outed me in front of the entire platoon. We were packing our gear, and I was talking about my best friend. Grayson looked at me and said, “Oh, I always thought you were gay.” I looked back at him and wondered what to do. If I told him I was gay, I would probably face the ridicule of the platoon for the entire deployment, and I just couldn’t handle that. So I lied. I said, “No. I’m not gay. Why would you ever think that?”

But now, watching Fredricks sing along to the song, I have this great desire to confide in him. I have nobody else to confide in, and it’s killing me to keep so much bottled up. I want to show him the picture of our lives together, the one that’s been forming in my mind. I see us sitting at the bar, as if this moment were a movie I am watching in a theater. I see myself—visibly distraught and half drunk—spilling my entire story to Fredricks. I see Fredricks smile and nod his head as he listens to my story. I see myself explain the difficulty of not being myself during this deployment, how I started this deployment a naïve but self-respecting man, and now I don’t even recognize the man I’ve become. The bar scene fades out and we cut to years later, where I’m living the life I want to live, and Fredricks is standing next to me as we buy a house, shop for groceries, pick out wine, choose a wooden crib.

But then reality grabs my shirt and shakes me violently. I look over at Fredricks. I open my mouth but I don’t say a word. I can’t. Men just don’t do that in bars on military bases. I remain silent while in the background a woman compares love to a battlefield.

I’m not strong, even though the Pat Benatar wannabe made me feel otherwise.

What I realized, that night in the bar, was that it wasn’t Fredricks I was longing after. I didn’t really imagine a future with Fredricks, although at the time I liked to think I did. Fredricks was simply a stand-in for Jeremy, and ever since we got deployed I’ve wondered what went wrong between us. So in March I decide to send him an e-mail.

I sit down at the computer. I start by describing the men I’m with, our nights of drinking out in Colorado Springs, and the days we’ve spent preparing at Fort Carson. But before long the e-mail turns from simple descriptions of events and people into heartfelt feelings. I’m scared, and for the first time during the deployment, I admit it to someone else. I try to explain all the feelings I’ve had over the last two months, how I’ve been thinking about him ever since I left North Dakota, and how I’ve wished
for someone to confide in. Mostly, I ramble on about our relationship and how we never really had closure. My relationship with him was my first, and only real, one with another man, and after a year we simply decided to call it quits. He’d moved on—to graduate school in southern Minnesota—and I wasn’t ready to move with him. But for the last three years, I’ve been thinking about what would have happened between us.

Then, at the end of the e-mail, I type three words that surprise me: I LOVE YOU. I want him to know that even though I didn’t say it much during our relationship, I did love him. And if I didn’t return from this deployment I wanted him to know that. I stare at the computer screen for a few minutes and wonder if I really mean it. Do I love him or just the memory of him? I LOVE YOU. It’s typed out right there in Times New Roman, so it must be true.

I check my e-mail several times over the next couple of weeks, hoping that I’ll get an e-mail back from him, something along the line of I love you, too, or simply I used to love you, too, but nothing ever arrives.

Lake is crass, opinionated, and foolhardy, and that’s exactly why I like him. We’re a week away from leaving for Kuwait, and he’s standing outside our barracks, smoking a cigarette, and joking about re-enlisting in the army.

We all know Lake has no intention of re-enlisting. Lake, like me, is tired of playing the part of weekend warrior. For the last couple of months, we’ve all listened to his rants about the absurdity of our leadership and the ridiculous circumstances we’ve found ourselves in.

“The only way I’ll re-up,” he says, taking a long drag from his cigarette and blowing smoke rings into the night, “is if somebody from our battalion gets killed in Iraq. That’s the only way.”

I stare back at him, unsure if I should laugh or not. I let Lake’s comment sink in and wonder if his statement will actually come true.

“For every person killed, I’ll re-up for one year,” Lake says, smiling, “If the LT is killed, I’ll re-up for six.”

Lake goes on about seeing someone die in Iraq, and I wonder if he really means that, if he has this odd fascination with death, or, as I suspect is the case, he talks about death and seeing someone die as a means of coping with his own fears about the war. Even though he wouldn’t admit it, I think Lake fears the worst about the deployment, and this is his way of being prepared.

For the past three days we’ve been receiving briefings on our upcoming mission to Kuwait, and we’re almost prepared to leave. We’ve divided our
time between packing and a disguised form of celebrating. The hours of packing are interrupted with a medical briefing or a last-minute trip to the firing range or some field exercise on how to read a compass. At the end of the day, we celebrate with cans of beer and cigars because we are finally leaving, and our mission is about to begin.

On April 7 we sit in Fort Carson’s auditorium waiting for our farewell ceremony. Some colonel will get on stage and tell us that even though we haven’t the faintest idea what we’ll be doing once we get to Kuwait, we are still needed—our presence is critical to the military’s mission.

To my right, Rainman is telling a story about the past weekend. Rainman is an old navy seaman who joined Bravo Company shortly before we left. He is short and stout, and wears a bushy, sand-colored mustache under his nose. We’ve nicknamed him Rainman because he walks like the Dustin Hoffman character in the movie.

“So I was out shopping with my wife this weekend,” Rainman says, leaning over from my right. His wife is one of the more frequent visitors to Fort Carson. She’s been here almost every weekend. Every Friday we release Rainman from our grasps—the tangled mess we call military brotherhood—and back into the arms of his wife. “We’re in Target and she takes me over to the pantyhose display and asks, ‘Which kind do you want?’”

Lake laughs. He’s sitting in the row behind us. “Well, well, well. The truth finally comes out,” he says.

Rainman laughs along with us.

“No, no. I guess she was at some family support meeting and they were preparing care packages to send to us. One of the items on the list of things we supposedly needed was pantyhose.”

I notice the look on Lake’s face, trying to figure this out.

“It’s because of the sand fleas,” Newman says, leaning in from Rainman’s right. “My wife did the same damn thing. Like we’re supposed to know what shade of pantyhose goes best with combat boots and dog tags.”

“My grandmother sent me pantyhose in her last package,” Elijah says. “There they were, tucked neatly between a jar of Planter’s peanuts and a tube of Colgate.”

“I mean, can you imagine,” Lake says, “some stupid-ass lieutenant briefing his troops before a battle and saying, ‘Okay men, all you have to do is gently pull it over your legs covering any exposed skin, as it is pertinent to success in this battle?’”

Rainman doubles over, folding his head between his legs as laughter echoes against the auditorium walls. The image of soldiers on the front
lines of battle sitting in silence as they roll the pantyhose up over their thighs strikes us all as funny, and we join Rainman in a bout of joy. These are the same men who’ve been fascinated by war, the ones who helped build Bangalore torpedoes and gawked at the CNN images of Baghdad burning. They are now laughing like a group of women after church, giggling about runs in their stockings.

“So anyway,” Rainman continues, regaining his composure, “I was going to buy some but all they had were control tops and I don’t want that much control.”

Our laughter bounces off the wall, off the chairs, and off the soldiers themselves.

“Wait a second,” I say. “What the hell makes you think pantyhose are going to keep these things from chewing on our legs? I mean there has to be some other way. What if I’m killed? I don’t want my mother finding out I spent my last days making sure my legs looked great in a pair of L’eggs pantyhose.”

We’ve been at war for nineteen days, and every day the newspaper releases a record of the number of troops killed in the war. This morning the paper reported that seventy-two U.S. troops had been killed since the war began. Our laughter, the hearty eruptions bursting from our throats, is simply covering up the fear that buries itself in our stomach.

“Well, they feed off of dead skin,” Newman says. “You don’t cover them up, you take that risk.”

It seems simple. I’ve been covering up this entire deployment. This camouflaged uniform is just a mask—a disguise—that turns me into a different person. When I look in the mirror, I don’t see the man who left North Dakota more than two months ago. Instead, I see a chameleon, someone who shifts colors to blend in with his surroundings. He’s different; he’s more violent and greedy; he no longer thinks of peace but rather of vengeance. And he protects himself from his surroundings by putting up a wall—a shell—so no one can see his true self.

I zone out for most of the ceremony. I am too busy thinking about the man I’ve become. Inside I’ve roared and howled and fought against the circumstances I am in. I don’t want to take on the responsibilities this deployment has given me. Mostly, I don’t want to become one of them—these military men I used to try to separate myself from. Yet what I’ve realized is that I’ve become exactly that. I’ve let myself be consumed by the lifestyle of a soldier. I don’t have this other life I can return to after taking off the uniform. When I am done playing soldier at five o’clock, I am stuck
with the same group of men and women I’ve just spent the day with; there is no room to lead a double life.

After the ceremony we wait in the lobby. The buses, which will take us back to our packing, are on their way. Over the next few days we’ll make our final preparations. We’ll eat our last decent meals, drink our last cans of beer. We’ll celebrate and joke. The few women in our platoon will tease the men for buying black pantyhose, because only sluts wear black. Regardless we’ll stuff them deep into our bags, hoping that the fleas aren’t as bad as they say and that we’ll never have to retrieve them.

And I’ll settle into the fact that’s I’m alone on this deployment, even with so many people around.

A week after arriving at Fort Carson, we got lost on the city streets of Colorado Springs. We weren’t worried about where we were going. We just needed to find a Laundromat. Any Laundromat would do.

We loaded a two-and-a-half-ton truck with soldiers and dirty laundry, and took to navigating the streets of an unfamiliar city. I sat near the back of the truck and watched the store signs and streetlights whiz by. I noticed familiar signs—McDonald’s, Barnes and Noble, Best Buy—and realized we were not far from home. But the signs soon became unfamiliar. A jewelry store with a bright, shiny diamond on the sign. A bank. A small, run-down grocery store. A hometown café with a pig over the front door. After nearly thirty minutes, we pulled into a parking lot. I looked out the back of the truck and saw a tiny unnamed Laundromat across the street.

“Is this the ghetto?” King asked. “Where the hell are we?”

Rainman ambled out of the truck, released the chains from the tailgate, and lowered it, allowing us to climb down.

“It’s the first one we found,” Rainman said as he looked over the building. “It’ll have to do.”

We grabbed our laundry bags and made our way toward the building. I looked around and noticed that the street was in rough shape. In fact, the whole neighborhood was in rough shape. The houses were small and squat, pushed together along a dirty street block. Some of the houses looked abandoned. From the front porch of one house, a dog barked as we walked by. I quickly realized we were in the poorest part of town.

“Ghetto Joe’s,” King said softly as he pushed open the door.

Inside, about twenty beat-up washing machines lined the back wall and formed two lines down the middle of the room. The outside wall was lined with dryers. The Laundromat was nearly empty aside from an old
woman near the back and a middle-aged man loading jeans into a dryer. Outside I heard children playing in the distance and that dog barking his heart out.

I quickly began my laundry routine, sorting and stuffing. As I stuffed a load into one of the machines, I heard my name from across the room. I looked over and saw Roach talking to the man who was loading jeans into a dryer. Roach is in his thirties, with gray hairs at his temples. He’s very business-minded yet amicable, easy to talk to. He’s also new to the unit, so he’s still humble and approachable, unlike some of the older guys in the platoon.

I walked across the room, and Roach introduced me to Roger, a man who looked to be in his late thirties, gray hair poking from the old cap he wore. He shook my hand firmly and asked if I wanted to play chess.

“Yeah, I’ll play,” I said.

As Roach made his way over to one of the washers, Roger began setting up the game. I watched his thick hands—clean and tan—handle each piece. He seemed to place the pieces in just the right spot. I noticed the intensity with which he set up the game, as if the setup were more important than the game itself.

“He said you’re at Fort Carson,” Roger said. “How long have you been there?”

“About a week,” I said. I explained our situation. I told him about our rapid deployment, how close I was to getting out of the military, and how close I was to graduating from college and moving on with my life. I also told him about the uncertainty of our mission, something that gets Roger thinking.

“What do you think of Fort Carson?” he asked.

“They don’t really seem prepared for us,” I said. “We’re living in a maintenance bay . . . on cots.”

I noticed a smile creep across Roger’s face. He nodded, as if he understood. I was immediately drawn to his eyes. They were dark blue—inviting and warm. They softened the hardness of the rest of his face.

“Well, that’s the military for you.”

Roger released the knight he’d been holding and captured one of my pawns. He lifted the pawn off to the side of the board and laid it down on the Formica countertop.

“Have you ever been in the military?”

“No,” he said. “It’s complicated, but I could never do that to myself. I could never let the government have that much control over my life.”
He lifted his eyes from the board and looked me straight in the eyes. I noticed the dark circles, his thin lips, and his high cheek bones.

“What do you mean?”

I watched his strong fingers grip a rook and move it forward. His moves were well calculated and quick. He never thought too long about a certain move or second-guessed his actions. He reminded me of my father in that way. Yet, what threw me about Roger was the mystery of what he said. There was something cryptic and spooky about his words.

“Let me ask you this,” Roger said. “How do you feel about being a minion in the army?”

I watched his knight take another one of my pawns. We were silent for a few minutes. Behind me, the washing machines spun their final cycle. Inside the machines, my uniforms were being spun around in circles—controlled.

“I mean no disrespect,” he explained. “I just don’t trust our government. I just can’t let my life be run by them. That’s why I threw away my driver’s license and burned my Social Security card. I removed the license plates from my car. I live a truly free life. Nobody controls me.”

I didn’t know what to say. I listened respectfully and watched as Roger’s fingers tossed one of my pawns from palm to palm. I felt a little uneasy standing across from him. Part of me wanted to simply walk away, but that was what I always did when I didn’t like what I heard. For the first time, I stood and listened to what was being said to me.

“I just want to understand, you know?” Roger said. He’d returned his attention back to the game. “I want to understand why the government feels they can use people like that.”

The game finished when Roger’s queen took my king. I knew early on that I couldn’t win that game. All I could do was put up my best defense until that simply wasn’t enough.

Roger thanked me for the game and shook my hand after he’d gathered up the pieces.

“Good luck,” he said.

He looked me squarely in the eyes. I could tell he felt sorry for me and for what the government was making me do. It almost seemed that in my eyes he could see what the future held for me, what this deployment had in store. I wanted to ask him what he saw, if he saw me returning from this deployment the same person. But, sadly, I already knew the answer.

Roger gathered up his laundry and left the Laundromat. I returned to my washer and moved my uniforms over to the dryer. The LT and Grayson took a truck to a nearby burger restaurant and came back with half-pound
burgers and fries. Roach and I sat on the plastic lawn chairs outside the
building, each holding a giant burger, and watched the sun sink lower in
the sky.

“When do you figure they’ll tell us where we’re headed?” I asked Roach.

“Who knows,” Roach said. “I figure we’ll be stuck in this town for
quite a while.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Turkey’s never going to let us in. It just won’t happen.”

I remember feeling the warmth of sitting in the sun outside that
Laundromat. As I took another bite from my burger, I watched a couple of
kids throw a ball against the side of the building. They were waiting for
their mothers to finish their laundry and take them home.

“What happens if they let us into Turkey?” I asked.

“Well, then we’re in trouble.”

Roach leaned back in his chair, gripped his burger with both his hands,
and took a big bite from the middle. Grayson and Newman stood near the
street with their hands on their hips and their backs turned to us. The
setting sun shone on their faces, and pink rays of light snuck through their
arms and cast shadows onto the sidewalk behind them. A little girl rode by
on a bicycle, red and blue streamers waving from her handlebars. Inside, I
heard the gentle sound of water filling a washing machine and I felt at ease.
Then suddenly the machine began its washing cycle and sent the world
spinning on its head.