The Last Deployment

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In the dream I am guarding the Baghdad zoo. The night sky is starless, a blank void of darkness, and below the horizon the grass in the field looks deep blue like an ocean of softly shifting waves. Out on this ocean of grass are all the animals of the zoo. There’s a shaggy-looking lion asleep near the wall that surrounds the field. A gaggle of geese is camped out nearby, weeds growing around their slender necks. There’s a giraffe, a zebra, a couple of wolves, and a monkey or two. They are all asleep in the field, living together in harmony—at least for one night.

I’m in a guard tower overlooking these animals. The guard tower is in the corner of the field, a white, two-story shack with floor-to-ceiling windows. I feel like a prison guard up in that tower, looking down on everything below with disdain and distrust. It is quiet and motionless, almost too calm, and the atmosphere gives off an ominous glow. Beside me, a faceless soldier is asleep, and I feel like I am the only living thing awake in Baghdad.

The eeriness of the night gives way to fear as three figures appear along the horizon. They are nothing more than shadows, three black silhouettes slinking along the wall. They take careful steps around the animals, as if they are crooks tiptoeing around security obstacles. There are no faces, no hands, no fingers pulling at triggers. They are shadows, ghosts almost, moving across the field toward me.

In the dream, I don’t think to raise my gun and fire shots at the figures. I’m too much in shock. I don’t think to wake the man next to me or to use the radio to relay the information back to headquarters. Instead, all I think about doing is running. Whenever I have a bad dream I think about running. I am five years old again, and I’m running to my parents’ bedroom.
I climb down from the tower and dash into the only building at the zoo, the one in the middle of the field. There is one long hallway, and I start to run down it, checking each door along the way. I look behind me, waiting for the figures to round the corner, waiting for shots to be fired. I find all the doors locked, and I panic. At the end of the hall I grab the knob of the last door. Inside is my mother’s basement pantry, pitch black and damp. When I was a child, my mother sent me to the pantry to fetch jars of preserves, and I stood in the doorway shivering, afraid of the moisture and concrete and the creatures I knew lived there. I step inside.

I am damp with sweat. As I crouch down, I feel rats scatter across my boots. I cradle the rifle in my arms, point the muzzle at the door, and wait. Deep down in the pit of my stomach, I feel my muscles tighten, fear spreading through my body. I close my eyes, grip my rifle tighter, and wait for them to find me.

I wake from the zoo dream nearly screaming. I am sweating, and across the tent I hear the heater kick in and start to blow warm air. My sleeping bag has been kicked off my bed. Instead of retrieving it, I lie on my cot and stare at the ceiling, thinking about the dream and watching the condensation drip from the green canvas.

It is December 15, ten days until Christmas, and it’s been raining all night. The nights have gotten cooler, and for the last two weeks we’ve endured sloppy rainstorms off and on. I’ve been in a sour mood lately, and the weather hasn’t helped. Lately, I’ve been thinking about distancing myself from the men in my platoon. I thought it would be easy being a gay soldier and having nothing to talk about with them. I thought the other men would easily figure it out and chastise me. But nothing like that ever happened, and after living together for nearly a year I’ve found that I can’t simply detach myself from them. If I did, I would be the one creating a rift in our military bond; I would be the one making it difficult for gay men and women to serve in the military, and that’s not what I wanted. I wanted to show that being gay in the military really doesn’t (and shouldn’t) matter.

I eventually rise from my bed and walk to the computer and phone tent in the middle of our section of base. The tent has six phone booths in the middle of the room, and along the outer wall are fifteen computers with Internet capabilities. Inside, I sign into one of the computers. Before I pull up a browser and check the latest news headlines, I get caught up in a phone conversation taking place behind me. I hear a female soldier say, “Do you have the TV on? We’ve captured Saddam!” and then hang up. She
then proceeds to dial a second number. She repeats the same question and statement, hangs up, and moves down her phone list, making a half-dozen calls back home to tell them about the news. As more and more people hear the news, the tent is abuzz with excitement.

The news continues to spread throughout the afternoon. There seems to be a sense of joy in the air, and back in my tent I convey this joy in my journal entry. I write: “Well, they’ve captured Saddam. They’ve finally got him. They have the tyrant in custody. It’s very good news. Now the fighting may die down, things will settle, and his few followers will quit fighting us.” And while I feel overjoyed at the fact that we’ve caught Saddam, I can’t help but feel a little sorry for the former leader because I understand what it’s like to live in hiding, to be forced to crawl into a hole and hide yourself away from everything you’re used to. I’ve been forced to do that the entire deployment. I’ve been in my mother’s old farmhouse pantry, waiting.

In the evening, just before midnight, I walk to Bravo Company’s MWR tent for a bottle of water. CNN is broadcasting pictures of the hole Saddam crawled out of. I watch the camera zoom into the spider hole, and I imagine a tired, old man crouched down in the dirt, shivering and cold, wondering how it came to this. Where has my life gone? Saddam may have asked himself, and I nod my head because I understand.

I hear the faint sounds of boots marching across concrete. The steps are getting closer, louder, and more urgent. They stop, and then start again, growing in volume as they get another step closer to my hiding place. When they stop outside my door, I know this is the end. I know they will throw open the door and find me, a shivering soldier weeping in a hole.

I think about running. I want to run away from it all, past the day I received that phone call placing me on active duty, past the boring days in Fort Carson, past the snowballs and pantyhose and newspaper listings of the soldiers killed during the war, past the endless miles of sand in Kuwait, past the scorpions, past the Iraqis selling moonshine, past the old Iraqi documents, past the crying mothers and the millions of begging children whose voices I can’t get out of my head. I want to run past it all and into the future, where I leave the military behind and live the life I’ve always wanted to live. But I’m tired of running. I’ve been running my whole life. If this deployment has taught me anything, it’s that I don’t always have to run. I don’t need to run away every time it gets rough. When they open the pantry door, I don’t try to dash out. I’m not weeping or even shivering, and
I no longer feel the fear in the pit of my stomach. I’ve been exposed, and instead of curling up tighter into myself, I look up at the face standing before me. I can’t make out the features, so I stand, look straight into that face, and say nothing.

I am no longer afraid.