Collateral Damage (a Novel)

Kimberlee Bethany Bonura

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE (A NOVEL)

KIMBERLEE BETHANY BONURA

Master’s Program in Creative Writing

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Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
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by
Kimberlee Bethany Bonura
2021
Dedication

In loving memory of my maternal grandparents, Adrian and Edna Boyum, who made sure that every house on every Army base always smelled like fresh baked bread and felt like home.

And for my mother, my own real-life feminist warrior.

Thank you for sharing the journey with me.
COLLATERAL DAMAGE (A NOVEL)

by

KIMBERLEE BETHANY BONURA, Ph.D.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
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of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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My mom. Thank you for answering a million questions that began with, “so tell me about …”, for trusting me to treat your experiences with respect, and for being an amazing proof-reader, copyeditor, and military fact-checker through many, many drafts of the many, many stories that eventually led to this manuscript. Also for believing, always, that I could write a novel (even, and especially, when I didn’t think I had anything worth saying).

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Figure 1:
My mother receives an award, with me at her feet. Fort Bragg, NC, 1978. (Official military ceremony photograph in B&W).

Figure 2:
My mother, with me, at a department event, Camp Darby, Italy, 1985. (Personal photograph in color).

Figure 3:
Like Barthes and Cantu, my project began with punctum, “a photograph’s … accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes, 27). I was reviewing family photographs and memories in general, but specifically, the life trajectory of photos best illustrated by Figures 1, 2 and 3, which show me quite clearly growing up in the shadows of my mother’s military service.

I began to explore the idea of my childhood, not in general, but specifically as my mother’s daughter, as a young woman coming of age in the feminist era of the Reagan-Thatcher 1980s, with a mother embedded in the very masculine environment of the military. In considering my memories, “I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (Barthes, 21).

Along the path of my studies, I encountered the voice of women veterans in Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War*: “Ask us while we’re alive. Don’t rewrite afterward without us. Ask …” (xliii). And so, I asked my mother. I turned from my own memories to her memories, and to the broader task of building a lattice of my experiences enmeshed with hers. My mom is now in her mid-70s. The scars and wounds of her 30 years, 2 months, and 12 days of military service run deep. Her daily routine requires a great deal of self-care in order to manage the physical and emotional pain left behind by her years of service. There is still a lack of cultural understanding and structural support for female service members, including a gap in service for female veterans in the Veteran’s Affairs Health System. Sometimes she feels that the decades of fighting and advocating had no purpose. Sometimes, without her uniform, without the structure that recognized
and formalized her competence and her authority (even while undermining her worth and value), she feels unheard, unseen, and forgotten.

But I hear her. I see her. And I remember.

My novel, Collateral Damage, centers on the impact of war and military service on women and families. The novel is set at Garrison Heidelberg (Germany), United States Army Europe Headquarters, from 1990 – 1991, during the period of the first Middle East Conflict and Gulf War. There are two primary characters and narrative voices. First, we meet Lieutenant Colonel Tamara (Tammy) Balzac, a married female officer in her mid-40s. Tammy’s stories are told by an omniscient yet detached 3rd person narrator, in past-tense. Next, we meet 15-year-old Catherine (Cat) Balzac, Tammy’s only child. Cat tells her own stories, in first person and present-tense. Over twenty-six stories, proceeding through time in chronological order and alternating between Tammy and Cat’s points of view, we experience these women as they experience military conflict, life as an American in a military context in Europe, and their family dynamic (which includes Lieutenant Colonel Tom Balzac, Tammy’s husband and Cat’s father).

Tammy Balzac, while fictional, allows me to explore and express my mother’s experiences as a career female Army officer, while my mother is alive for me to ask, and for her to read and respond and support my accuracy and authenticity of the female soldier’s experience in the modern US military. I hope that, like Alexievich’s efforts to allow her mother and grandmother (and their peers) to tell their stories, I may be able to, through my novel, do justice to the story of my mother (and her peers).

My purpose and intent in writing Collateral Damage is to examine, first, how military service uniquely impacts female soldiers; and second, how military life impacts the children of service members. In this preface, I will discuss: one, why I have chosen both this topic and the
novel form for my creative project; two, the role of women in the military; three, the impact of military life on military family members; and finally, the civilian-military gap in contemporary American life. My goal is to offer both historical and literary context for my creative decisions in writing this manuscript.

**WHY THIS STORY, AND WHY THIS FORM**

In 1974, my mother was commissioned as one of the 1,249 Officers in the Women’s Army Corps (Morden). In 1974, based on several ongoing lawsuits, the Department of Defense directed the Service Secretaries “to develop new policies making separations for pregnancy voluntary” (Murnane 1074) for implementation by May 1975, and in 1976 “the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit held that … discharge of [active duty service members due to pregnancy] … violated the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution” (Murnane 1074). In 1977, when I was born at Womack Army Hospital, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, my mother was (to the best of our knowledge, and we can find no official records) the first active-duty officer to give birth at Womack. In 1978, she was one of the 2,636 female officers integrated into the United States Army (Morden); there were 84,015 active duty officers in 1978 (Department of the Army Historical Summary: FY 1978). Female officers accounted for 3% of the officer corps at the time of integration. According to the Government Accountability Office, as of Fiscal Year 2018, 15.1% of the Army’s Officer corps was female.

And so, I spent my childhood along the front lines of not just military service, but of the battleground of feminism that is female military service. I don’t think I chose to write this novel, but rather, that I must write it, in order to understand who I am, as my mother’s daughter, as the inheritor of her feminism. According to Vargas Llosa, “the novelist doesn’t choose his themes; he
is chosen by them. He writes on certain subjects because certain things have happened to him. In the choice of a theme, the writer’s freedom is relative, perhaps even nonexistent” (15).

Having settled on the topic that has chosen me, I had to figure out the best form for my creative expression. I considered, first, the bildungsroman, the coming-of-age novel that allows an author to fictionalize and understand his youth. In my time at UTEP, I’ve read a variety of coming-of-age fiction, from classics like Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* to contemporary models such as Diaz’s *Drown*. However, I quickly came to realize that my story included not just an adolescent narrator, but also her adult mother. Further, though Cat is an adolescent narrator making sense of her world, my story framework differs from the traditional bildungsroman journey, in which a young person (usually male) separates himself from his youth and moves away from his family. Rather, Cat, like many of the stories in Cantu’s *Canicula* (another variation on the bildungsroman framework) is a young woman defining herself in relationship with and within the context of the important women in her life.

Virginia Woolf notes, *In A Room of One’s Own*: “I tried to remember any case in the courses of my reading where two women are represented as friends. … They are confidantes … They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men” (89). What I wanted, in my novel, is to show two women who, though they are shown in their relation to men (Tom, of course, but also Tammy’s colleagues, and Cat’s peers), are shown more importantly in their relation to each other. Cat’s perspective in my novel is a feminist adaptation of the coming-of-age novel. For instance, Cat reflects on her mother not as someone to move away from, but rather as someone to aspire to:

Those big-haired, shoulder-pad wearing, loud-mouthed broads you see on TV: Julia Sugarbaker. Murphy Brown. Cagney and Lacey. My mom is a real-life-version of those
bad ass feminist bitches. On an Army base, where the stay-at-home wives get together to have tea in their floral dresses and frosted lipstick, my mom stomps around in her Battle Dress Uniform and steel-toed combat boots, with a couple of loaded guns in the holsters on her hip.

When approaching a novel with roots in your own youth, there is an inherent challenge: how do you approach your own life, in fictionalized form, without any sympathy? How do you detach yourself from the wounds that you have nursed, the childhood pains and sorrows that you have blamed for your adult anxieties and fears? To synthesize Cantú’s Canícula, how do you take the shoebox of snapshots from underneath the bed and then build them into their own living, breathing short stories about a person who is not you, a person from who you are detached, a person for whom you feel neither sorry nor proud? To do this, even if a story and a character is inspired by your life, it must not actually be your life. Bret Anthony Johnston has written that as writers we should be guided by the principle of Don’t Write What You Know. “It’s the difference between fiction that matters only to those who know the author and fiction that, well, matters.” (20) and to do it, “instead of thinking of my experiences as structures I wanted to erect in fiction, I started conceiving of them as the scaffolding that would be torn down once the work was complete” (21).

Virginia Woolf says that as we write, we must separate ourselves, from our own emotions about our experiences. She notes that the power of Jane Austen’s work is that we do not know “if Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances” (73) because in her work, we find “writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching,” (73). We move from the style of memoir (which is grounded in our own emotional experiences of our
personal lives, and perhaps firmly entrenched in our own feelings of hate, bitterness, fear, and protest) to the technique of autofiction, which allows us to use our lives as jumping off points. As Gornick says, to do this, we must “pull back – way back – from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure” (17) and in doing this we must create a narrator who, though a surrogate for the writer’s ideas, is not the writer herself, “only her solid, limited self … in control” (18).

In considering military fiction, I considered the model of Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried. The Things They Carried is a work of fiction, yet the primary character is named after the author. Throughout the collection, O’Brien highlights the tension between happening-truth and story-truth. He uses this style of auto-fiction as a form of self-healing:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain (169).

In considering my own story development I wanted, for instance, to show the inherent tensions, on the insular military base, between adolescent girls who are soldier’s daughters, and the still-adolescent soldiers with whom they often interact. At one of the high schools I attended, a girl got pregnant from her GI boyfriend and, afraid of her father, killed herself. To use O’Brien’s metaphor, that was the night in the shit field, the real and terrible story that I carried forward into fiction.

Woolf also highlights the importance of story truth: “What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth” (78). A well told story
is a lie of characters and place and action, but at the core, at the center, is a truth, of human nature, of experience, of love or loss or hatred. The true core makes the reader believe the lie, experience it as perhaps even more real and more substantial than the many small, boring, seemingly insignificant truths that may have actually happened.

Writing from this core also can, at its best, heal the writer. In the video clip about The Truly Exceptional Moment, Derrida talks about the moment of writing, the way these moments of writing are “upheavals for me, small earthquakes when I wrote them.” They are shifts in consciousness when his writing changes him, forces him to shift and re-examine his perspective. Every page of this novel, every word, has forced me to confront my assumptions about myself, my feminism, my childhood within the military. Fiction allows us to explore the things we need to explore, to heal wounds that have festered. Gornick writes that in fiction and poetry, we can use our surrogates for “all that the writer cannot address directly – inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, antisocial desires – but must address to achieve felt reality” (6). Fiction allows us to explore the deeper, darker, angrier facets of our own selves. Fiction allows us to prioritize our honesty over our kindness. In fiction, we can be braver than we are in life. And maybe, in writing fiction, we become as brave as our works. At the very least, for me, the writing of this work has helped me to appreciate how very brave my mother was throughout her career, in all that she stoically endured.

WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

Alexievich’s The Unwomanly Face of War offers a historical account of women in war, both generally (through Alexievich’s introduction and occasional authorial insights) and more specifically the individual memories of Soviet women who served during World War II. Many of these women served in combat, not only as nurses, but also as gunners and tankers and infantry,
in positions of combat, surviving cold and famine, seeing their comrades die, and in many cases
directly killing the enemy. And yet, as Alexievich notes, though these women were part of history,
their voices were not:

Everything we know about war we know with “a man’s voice.” We are all captives of
“men’s” notions and “men’s sense of war. “Men’s” words. Women are silent. No one but
me ever questioned my grandmother. My mother. Even those at the front say nothing. If
they suddenly begin to remember, they don’t talk about the “women’s” war but about the
“men’s.” … [But] “women’s stories are different and about different things. “Women’s”
war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its
own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy
doing inhumanly human things” (xv).

Alexievich sets out to “write the history of that war. A women’s history” (xvi) and therefore
to expand our historical understanding to include the voices of women – which allows us to see
the broader impact of war. Not just war as in battles won and lost, but war as individual lives
ruined, people killed, people who survive what no one should have to survive. Because
“women’s” war is more terrible than ‘men’s.’ Men hide behind history, behind facts; war
fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with
feelings” (xxii).

Moving from World War II era Russia to modern America, we see similar issues in the
diminishment, disregard, and sexualization of female soldiers. Kayla Williams’ Love My Rifle
More than You is a memoir about her five years of service as an enlisted soldier in the US Army,
including serving as an Arabic linguist military intelligence specialist for 1 year in Iraq, as part of
the first wave of post 9/11 deployment of U.S. soldiers to the Middle East. This is one of the few first-person memoirs written by a female service member about military service. Williams reflects on the challenges of being female in a combat zone, where though she was not actually in combat due to gender-based restrictions for military specialty in place 2005, she was often serving with combat soldiers at forward locations as a military intelligence and Arabic linguist. While the public perception is that women don’t serve in combat, Williams makes it clear that women do, in fact, serve in combat areas in a variety of combat support roles.

As Williams’ makes clear, even when you are an equal member of the service, when only a small portion of the service is female (15%, by the time Williams is on active duty), you are always a female service member. This can make you feel like you serve as both a representative of and for all women, and that you are judged by the actions of other women. When a female soldier was less competent or cried in front of others, the other female soldiers faced judgements and concerns about their competence. “People remain concerned about women in leadership roles. So for SSG Simmons to have her breakdown in public does not help. … This woman’s incompetence makes all women in the Army look incompetent” (268).

Or, after soldiers encountered one woman willing to have sex while deployed, the few other women would find themselves increasingly propositioned. “Sometimes, even now, I wake up before dawn and forget I am not a slut. … Slut. The only other choice is bitch. If you’re a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get” (Williams 13). In one story, while serving as the only female with a group of men in a forward deployment, after weeks in the field, the men tried to convince her to “show us your boobs!” (Williams 22). Another soldier begins calling her Boobs when she arrives on site, and “he never quits calling me this after that first day” (Williams 166). When a co-worker on night shift grabs her hand and presses it to his penis, she declines to file a
complaint because, “as much as the Army would like to tell us that it’s not true, girls who file EO (equal opportunity) complaints are treated badly. … Even girls don’t like girls who file EO complaints – they don’t want to rock the boat” (Williams 209).

Many of Williams’ stories address the constant current (both subtle and overt) of sexuality and sexualization that women in the military face. “If you’re a woman in the Army, it doesn’t matter so much about your looks. What counts is that you are female” (Williams 14). This sense of never belonging, of being gendered first before being a soldier, is an important part of the story I hope my novel tells. As Collateral Damage begins, Tammy leans against a window, watching a group of her male colleagues laugh and smoke, while she fumes over her inability to make real change about an issue with rapes of female soldiers in the barracks. Her boss, a General, dismissed her concerns, calling her dear, and treating her like a child. Tammy wonders:

what it would be like to be one of them. It didn’t matter that she wore the same uniform and the same combat boots as every one of them. It didn’t matter that the silver oak leaves on her shoulders were the same ones as every other Lieutenant Colonel on post. She was an outsider.

Life, for women in the military, is always a war zone, even when women are not at war. The military is, in so many ways, a traumatic environment for female soldiers. They are treated always as soldiers who are women, instead of as soldiers.

**Military Families**

In literature, we encounter soldiers as primarily male, young, and independent. The hero is a young man without attachment, familial obligation, or any other impediment to duty. The
unencumbered warrior/soldier/savior fights his battles to save the world. And yet, the unencumbered warrior/soldier/savior is an inaccurate reflection of life itself. Consider a research analysis of military marriage and divorce rates in the *Journal of Family Issues* (Karney, Loughran, and Pollard), which found that military service members had higher rates of marriage and lower rates of divorce, when compared to age-matched ethnic groups of civilians. A portion of the analysis looking at military marriage during US involvement in the Middle East conflict in the early 2000s, found that even during war, service members had higher rates of marriage and lower rates of divorce than matched civilians. A similar analysis of fire fighters found that male fire fighters had a higher marriage rate (77%) than age-matched civilians (58%) and a slightly lower divorce rate (14.08% vs. 16.35%), (Torres, Synett, Pennington, Kruse, Sandford, and Gulliver 4).

Military spouse and poet Jehanne Dubrow often writes of the difficulties of a marital life lived beside military service, of the juxtapositions that occur when love is placed next to war. For instance, the poem “When I Marry Eros,” begins:

He’s dressed in the uniform of war, our wedding photograph a shot of cream and navy.

(Kindle location 674).

In real life, our lives are centered in relationship and connection. People matter. Relationships matter. Connections matter. In real life, when heroes go off – whether to war, to fight fires, or to battle in cyberspace – they leave behind people with whom they have connections. They leave behind fathers and mothers (worried mothers, perhaps, like Y.T.’s mom in *Snow Crash*), sometimes fathers and mothers they will never see again (such as Genly Ai’s parents, for
whom far more time has passed and who have died since Genly Ai left his own planet in service, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*). They leave behind adults, such as friends, siblings, and parents. They often, also, leave behind children. A 2013 analysis of military families reports that military family members outnumber military personnel by 1.4 to 1 and that there are more than 1.2 million dependent (i.e., under the age of 18) children in active-duty military families in the US, and another 743,736 children of Guard and Reserve families (Clever and Segal 16). Military brats understand all too well the sacrifices heroes make. In Ashlee Cowles’ novel *Beneath Wandering Stars*, the teen-age military brat narrator remembers her brother, in a coma after injuries of Iraq, saying when their dad left for war after 9/11: “Heroes always have to leave the ones they love … that’s what a hero is,” (75).

Throughout my novel, and particularly for Cat’s voice, I have chosen to tell the story in a matter-of-fact way, still dealing with the ordinary aspects of teen-age life, including her hair, clothes, and makeup. For instance, after waking up to her parent’s fighting, Cat still has to get ready for school:

I have to unplug the hairdryer before plugging in the curling iron, because even if the hairdryer is off, having them both plugged into the same outlet will blow the circuit. I carefully work my hair, creating a high fringe that Tawny Kitaen could rock in a White Snake video. I want to curl up and go back to bed and hide from the stress of my parents’ perpetual fighting. But my look takes work, my reputation as cool instead of nerd is precarious, and I don’t get a day off from the game.

Adolescents forced to grow up quickly in certain aspects of their lives are still adolescents, concerned with their appearances, their developing bodies and hormones, their relationship with
their friends and growing sexuality, and all the fears and insecurities inherent in this period of development. Even in the worst of conflict, ordinary life continues, and we must carry on with it.

As Dubrow writes:

*It’s terrible and lonely and difficult*

I say, meaning

I think to be married

to a man like him or any of the men

in this room – or for that matter,

my husband –

who’ve sworn to protect against threats foreign

and domestic

(Kindle location 817).

**THE CIVILIAN – MILITARY DIVIDE**

We see further discussion of these challenges, of loving and living with someone sworn to protect against threats foreign and domestic, in Siobhan Fallon’s short story collection, *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. The spouses in Fallon’s short stories deal with the stressors of other military spouses, of children and barking dogs in thin-walled military housing units, with fighting breast cancer during a war. In “Inside the Break,” a young wife and mother faces her suspicions that her husband is having an affair with another soldier while in Iraq, and ultimately decides, on his return, to blindly accept his protests of innocence and welcome him home. By the end of the collection, one wife has left her soldier, one soldier is dead, another soldier has lost his leg, and several families are broken.
In a world where it is normal for a thousand men to pack their bags, meet on a parade field, and then disappear for an entire year, the women of deployed soldiers stuck together. Mingling too often with the civilian world, so full of couples, of men nonchalantly paying bills, planning vacations, and picking kids up after ball games, those constant reminders of what life could be, would drive an army spouse crazy. (Fallon Kindle location 138).

A liminal space is often defined as a period bounded by time – college, for instance, as the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. The transition between adolescence and adulthood is often conceptualized as a liminal space, the threshold world between what was and what’s next. Others live in a liminal space between cultures. Diaz begins *Drown* with an epigraph, a poem from Gustavo Pérez Firmat, that defines life in the liminal space between cultures: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don’t belong in English though I belong nowhere else.” Extending this to my topic and my story, where, exactly, do military brats live and belong, when they are neither of the civilian world, nor, strictly speaking, of the military world? Where am I from when I have never served in the military, but I’ve lived my entire life in its shadows?

Statistically speaking, less than 0.5% of the population is currently on active duty in the armed forces (Eikenberry and Kennedy), and only 12.7% of adults in the US are veterans (Newport). Among adult women, only 2% have prior military service. Very few Americans have any connection to actual, real-life authentic military culture. Based on this civilian-military gap in understanding, in prior academic work, my colleagues and I proposed the need for the development of a military cultural competence, to support higher education faculty and staff in meeting the unique and often unrecognized needs of military students (Bonura and Lovald). In our
recommendation paper, we outlined the varying needs of active duty service members, of veterans, and of military family members.

Cowles reflects on the civilian-military divide in her novel. Her protagonist is walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in honor of her wounded and comatose brother, with his best friend (whose combat injuries were less severe). At one point in their journey, they meet a young woman from California who asks “‘What, did you just return from a war or something?’ A war? Please tell me that in between her salon visits, this girl at least learned the names of the countries we’ve been fighting for the past decade. No wonder soldiers feel exiled from people so disconnected from reality. A warrior caste is right” (108).

As I wrote and revised Collateral Damage, I asked myself continuously: how can I authentically communicate military life in civilian language? How can I tell these stories in a way that they matter to people who have never lived on a military base? The task is, as Gornick says, to transform “love-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader” (7). I chose, in Tammy’s stories, to maintain a more neutral 3rd person, explanatory tone, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps to understanding as necessary, from context. I chose with Cat, with her 1st person, teen-age military brat persona, to have Cat Army-splain the context and lingo and acronyms of her life. Cat assumes that a world of people who ask, “Where are you from?” (to the perpetual annoyance of military brats) will need explanations for every aspect of military life that she (and her fellow military brats) take for granted.

Cat provides these explanations (sometimes obviously and with annoyance), because she knows that civilians live in “a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know” (O’Brien 154). Civilians keep their heroes at a distance with parades. Civilians watch
soldiers in movies, and remember that war is hell. Civilians say “thank you for your service” in airports and then go back to the safety of their own lives.

For soldiers, war is more complicated than hell. War is the show. It’s the Super Bowl, and soldiers want their rings. In war, they make their best friends, and feel at their most alive, standing on the precipice of death. We are not, now in the US, in the post-Vietnam era, a military of disgruntled drafted soldiers. We are an all-volunteer Army. War and military service is the glory soldiers choose. In Fallon’s collection, a soldier consoles his boss’ widow:

He loved his job, ma’am. … He made other people love their job, including me. … He would say things like, “There is an entire video game industry trying to copy what you men get paid to do every day,” or “You defend your country, you carry a gun, you blow things up, what do you have to complain about, soldier?”

(Kindle location 2305).

We see the soldiers’ love of war in Will Mackin’s collection of post-9/11 war stories, *Bring Out the Dog* (based on his experiences as a Navy SEAL). The characters kill (and sometimes die). They are traumatized and broken. They are also big boys, having a lot of fun, with their grown-up weapons. At one point, in “Crossing the River No Name”, in a story about a nighttime mission, the narrator says “Hal, walking point, would’ve turned around and smiled, like, Do you believe we’re getting paid for this? And I would’ve shaken my head, like, No” (118). In my novel, Cat is trying to make sense of this very attitude, held by her father. In my experience, military brats experience two emotions in response to their parent’s service – resignation or rage. Cat speaks for those who rage:
Why doesn’t obligation to us matter? Why does he love being a solider more than he loves me? Loves mom? He thinks the war is a goddamn Super Bowl and he wants to get to the show and come home with his ring. Civilians always say bullshit things like war is hell, so how bad must our everyday lives be if my dad wants to leave us to go to hell? I don’t want some posthumous medal because my dad showed his personal fucking red badge of courage.

The men in Mackin’s stories are often broken and damaged. They are willing to break someone’s nose over a carton of chocolate milk in the DFAC (Dining Facility) in the Middle East. They want to go to war for the thrill of the fight. After the fight, even the ones who come back, come back scarred, different, broken in some ways, with “… body parts, hands and feet separated from limbs, lives and identities lost, bits and pieces left behind and buried in Baghdad” (Fallon, “Inside the Break,” Kindle location 1405). They are changed in ways that impact their families. “She didn’t want a man with memories that made him shout at a television set, flinch in his sleep, kick strollers, and now this battered cheek, swollen eye, prison urine stench. … the hesitation and nervous laughter, the echoes of their own voices like ghosts of what they used to be” (Fallon, “You Survived the War, Now Survive the Homecoming,” Kindle location 2192 - 2197). Only the soldiers go to war, but their families suffer with them.

Cat says, considering her father:

Over the last year in Germany, as Dad has gotten farther and farther away from his red-bereted, tobacco-chewing, jumping-out-of-airplanes self, he has become less and less a pointillism caricature of a soldier and more a real person. An actual dad.

Heroes are a lot like impressionist art: best viewed from a distance.
RETREAT

The Buddhist Concept of Right Speech says that, before we speak, we should always consider three questions. First, we ask, “Is it true?” If it is not true, we should not speak it. If it is true, we must consider the next question. Second, we ask, “Is it kind?” If it is both true and kind, we are free to speak. Things that are both true and kind are always right speech. If it is true but not kind, then we must consider the third question. Third, we ask, “Is it necessary?”

According to marriage researcher John Gottman, 69% of marital conflict is unresolvable. We can extend this statistic, according to psychological research, to most interpersonal conflict: 69% of our differences are unresolvable. Talking does not solve them. Arguing does not solve them. Fighting does not solve them. And therefore, by the metric of The Buddhist Concept of Right Speech, so many of our true but unkind thoughts yield speech unnecessary. A mental health counselor once told me that when you feel an urgency to confront someone over an old wound, the urgency is only within your own psyche, and you are better off to journal, to meditate, to find what Bréne Brown calls the “core emotion” under the wound.

There is much I want to say about the military life I have lived. It is true and unkind, and perhaps unnecessary. I meditate on the Buddhist principles, and I choose not to speak. Yet there are still things I want to say. As Rachel Cusk has written, “very often a desire to write is a desire to live more honestly through language.” When what we want to say, have to say, is both true and necessary, but not kind, fiction supports our speech. But this speech is difficult to do.

In Fear of Writing, Derrida reflects on how we speak our unkind but necessary thoughts. He notes that when he is writing he is consumed by the work. But later, after it has been written, “there is a kind of panic in my subconscious. … [the fear says] stop everything. Take it back. Burn
your papers. [This fear is] a vigilance [that] tells me that what I’m doing is very serious.” And so, as a writer he finds himself in an internal struggle between a sense of self-protection (to NOT say the thing that is not allowed) and a sense of urgent self-expression (that it is necessary and urgent to say the things that were not allowed). For Derrida, expression “is the stronger of the two. And so, I do what must be done.”

And so, like Derrida, I have done what must be done. I have written a novel based on the honest, core emotions which I, perhaps, would rather not share. I have never worn a uniform or served in the military, yet I’ve lived most of my life in the shadows of service. I have never been to war, and still my life has been defined by the contours of its maps. I am a reluctant patriot. I get tears in my eyes at the National Anthem. I weep at country songs about soldiers coming home in boxes, because I know, up close and personal, the costs individuals bear in war, even when, like me, they have always lived far from the front lines. As Fallon writes:

She wanted to worry about ordinary things like whether her husband forgot his lunch or got a bonus, not that he might get shot or that he’d be crossing a street in Baghdad and never get to the other side. She carried her worry night and day. It pulled at her legs and shoulders and tear ducts, always there and ready to consume her (Kindle location 267).

I wrote this story with constant awareness of the weight I carry on my shoulders. I asked myself many questions, but I have no answers. As O’Brien cautions us, when reading stories about war:

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. … In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the
meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe, ‘Oh’ (72 - 79).

As you read my novel, dear reader, remember: I’m not offering lessons about how life should be, for female soldiers or for military families. I just want to tell the story truth, the lived experience, and to make you see for a moment the way “the things men have always done” look through a pair of female eyes.

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Collateral Damage (A Novel)

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. Though it is set at a real place (US Army Garrison, Heidelberg) during a real time (1990 – 91, during the period of Desert Shield and Desert Storm), all names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.
“There it is, they’d say. Over and over – there it is, my friend, there it is – as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without going, there it is, which meant be cool, let it ride, because Oh yeah, man, you can’t change what can’t be changed, there it is, there it absolutely and positively and fucking well is.”

Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*
Tammy leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the windowpane. Across the distance of the post buildings and parking lot, she could see the sun beginning to set over the onion fields. She looked down at the cluster of men smoking under the lamp post. She could tell they were officers by their posture and their posturing, and she’d bet money if she could see their left hands, that they were all sporting West Point class rings.

She wondered what it would be like to be one of them. It didn’t matter that she wore the same uniform and the same combat boots as every one of them. It didn’t matter that the silver oak leaves on her shoulders were the same ones as every other Lieutenant Colonel on post. She was an outsider.

She wondered what it would feel like to belong, to have colleagues who had been classmates, to have mentors who had been teachers, to have a history that extended back before your commission date. Hell, she wondered what it would feel like to just plain have colleagues
and mentors, and not feel like the only one all the fucking time. The VMI guys and the ROTC alumni, they didn’t have the rings, but they still had the shared history and they had the sense of belonging to someone, belonging with someone. One of them.

She had already been a Women’s Army Corps officer for several years by the time that first group of 119 women entered West Point, and she’d been a Captain in the regular Army by 1980 when 62 of them had survived to their commissioning. She wondered how many of those young idealists were still officers a decade later. She wondered if they wore their West Point rings and smoked around light poles swapping stories of the never-ending grey winters at the Point, or if they, like her, were forever outsiders. Only seen as women, not officers.

She felt the familiar anger snaking up and down her spine. She’d gone into the meeting with the General prepared. Her report was solid. It should have been a quick brief. It should have been an easy approval.

“Tammy, dear,” he’d said dismissively over his coffee cup, “you’re only talking about a couple of dozen girls. Do you know how many complaints I have from officers who got passed over this last promotion board? Hundreds. Don’t waste my time.”

“Sir,” she had said, doing her best to stay cool and keep her tone measured. “We’re not talking about girls. We are talking about soldiers. About the fact that our female soldiers can’t go to bed at night without being afraid of their fellow soldiers. They wear the same uniform. They took the same oath. They have the same duty. Sexual assault – let’s be clear, rape – should not be part of their duty.”

Tammy didn’t want much. She didn’t ask for additional resources or additional time or even additional manpower. She just brought along her report as supportive information to explain to her boss why she was creating a task force within her unit. It should have been an easy FYI. A
few of her soldiers, looking for trends among all the rape cases they had already investigated, doing
a few additional inspections of the barracks, trying to identify common problems and potential
solutions.

“Tammy, dear,” he’d said, this time emphasizing the dear as if she was his way-ward
daughter home from college with an inappropriate suitor, “I don’t have time for my Acting Provost
Martial to waste her time or my time fighting a bunch of damned windmills. If a rape happens, you
send your boys to investigate and you do your job as expected. You stay focused on operations,
and keep your eye on the ball. Get the fuck out of my office. I have real Colonels waiting on me.”

Tammy gathered all her papers up. She shoved them into her briefcase, stuffing her fury
down her throat at the same time. She was so tired of being reminded that she was only the Acting
Provost Martial. That she was still only a Lieutenant Colonel (Promotable). It was not her fault
that Department of Army had wanted to try out a woman as a Provost Martial on a post of this
size, that they’d sent her into the position as soon as she’d been picked up for Colonel, and that
her pin-on date still hadn’t arrived. It wasn’t her fault. But it was her daily burden. As she opened
the door, the General barked through to his secretary to send in his next guest.

A Colonel stood up from his comfortable sprawl on the coach. He leaned into Tammy’s
face with a smirk as he pushed passed her through the open doorway.

“My boy!” the General boomed. “Have a cigar!”

Tammy heard the strike of the match as the door slammed behind her. She smelled the
General’s favorite cigar as she walked out of his front office. She didn’t want to bellow, or smoke
cigars, or knock rings like those jackasses. She just wanted to do the right thing. But was always
on the wrong side of the relationship.
Back in her office, Tammy watched the officers in the parking lot below her window laugh. They put their cigarettes out under the toes of their boots before they headed across the parking lot. She couldn’t imagine what it might be like to laugh that easily, to never question if your work would get done. She couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to be them.

There was a knock at her door. Tammy shrugged her shoulders hard, bringing herself back to what was, to her reality as a female officer.

“Enter,” she said.

“Hey, ma’am,” her XO stuck his head in. “You almost done?”

“I’ve got to finish my notes from the meeting today,” she said.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Disappointed. Like usual,” she shrugged.

She laughed a long, sad laugh. She looked toward the door. Her XO was waiting. Every boss Tammy had ever had, she’d had to arrive before and leave after. She didn’t put that burden on her own soldiers.

“Head out. I’ll lock up.”

“You sure?” he paused.

She nodded.

“You are the best, Ma’am,” he said.
I am sitting at a little wrought iron table along the edge of the pedestrian street, just barely under a streetlamp, trying to keep tabs of my friends. The night air smells like onions and strawberries, from the fields in the distance. The onions mingle with the scent of beer, and enough different perfumes to make you think you’re walking through one of those fancy department store make-up sections where trigger happy chicks squirt as you pass. The sky is clear and bright, and the moon is full. I check the time on my Swatch watch, and as I twist my wrist to see that it is 1:15 in the morning, I quickly flick the Jack Daniels out of my glass onto the cobblestone.

My mom is picking me and my friends up in her puttering punch-buggy, at 0200, or 2 am, in case you don’t know military time. She’s probably already parked, with the windows cracked, stealing a nap. I’ve got 45 minutes, which means I need to start herding cats. Because when my mom says she’ll pick us up at 0200, she does not mean 2:15. She does not mean 2:10. She does not even mean 2:02. She means 2 am, on the nose, and really 1:58 would be better, because if you’re not early, you’re late. And if you’re late, she is going to be pissed, and everyone is going to get it.

This is why I make sure all my friends understand something very important: my mother is a bitch.

I know what you’re going to say, my poor mother, her poor feelings, how someday I’m going to grow up and be a mom and have more sympathy for how hard it is to be a mother. Especially to a teen-age girl. That I should be kinder and more understanding to my poor, hard-working mother. Blah, blah, blah.

My mom knows what I tell my friends.

She’s totally fine with it. Because it’s true.
Say, for example, and I’m being completely hypothetical here, that you are Miss Popular in my fourth-grade class in Kentucky, and you come to my 8th birthday party at Chuck-E-Cheese. And maybe the poor teenage server accidentally spills a little Pepsi on your new mint green Keds, and you go off like Veruca Salt when she couldn’t have the Golden Geese. My mom might have taken your plate of pizza. And your cup of Pepsi. And your cup of game tokens. And told you that you could either apologize and learn to behave like a half-way decent human being, or you could go call your parents to pick you up immediately. And then, my mom would have put her arm around the teen-age waitress’ shoulder, handed her a tissue to wipe her eyes, and reassured the waitress that she (my mom) also worked as a waitress throughout high school, and to remember that hard work builds character, and that she (the waitress) would someday be a college graduate and working mom spending way too much money on an 8-year old’s birthday party.

Or perhaps you are a silver-haired, silver-tongued, silver fox Southern Gentleman with your decades-younger second wife at the North Carolina middle school PTA meeting. And maybe you took offense at the new school guidance counselor’s presentation about the social skills program she plans to implement, because she’s too young and too black for you to trust, and so you use your smooth-as-silk passive-aggressive sexist-racism to put her in her place. My mom might have stood up, interrupted you mid-sentence and, to use one of her favorite phrases, ripped you a new asshole. Yes, a new asshole. Then she would have stared at you with her eyebrow-raised-angry-mom-face until you sat your recently injured ass back down. Then she would have turned back to the front and calmly said,

“Miss Thomas, please continue, we are very interested in how we can support you as you support our children, and I’m sure there won’t be any more interruptions.”
Also, if you beat your wife, or steal government property, or try to sell drugs near a school, my mom will read you your rights, cuff you, and book you. Did I forget to mention, she’s a cop? And not just any cop, she is a military police officer. And not just any police officer, but currently, here on Garrison Heidelberg, she is the Provost Martial, which is, like, the head of the military police unit for the entire post. Okay, technically Acting Provost Martial because Provost Martial for a post this size is a Colonel’s position and she is still a Lieutenant Colonel – Promotable. Her Army Branch Manager sent her to start the job while she is waiting to get promoted because they thought it would be so! much! fun! to see how a woman would do in charge of the MP unit on a post of this size. But you get my point. Those big-haired, shoulder-pad wearing, loud-mouthed broads you see on TV: Julia Sugarbaker. Murphy Brown. Cagney and Lacey. My mom is a real-life-version of those bad ass feminist bitches. On an Army base, where the stay-at-home wives get together to have tea in their floral dresses and frosted lipstick, my mom stomps around in her Battle Dress Uniform and steel-toed combat boots, with a couple of loaded guns in the holsters on her hip.

I know there are a couple other women officers on post. Somewhere. Maybe? In my parents wedding picture, my mom and her five bridesmaids are all in their Dress Blue Uniforms. They all went to Officer Basic together and were commissioned into the Women’s Army Corps together. So, I know that other women officers exist. The Army Times reports that they do. I think I had a female officer dentist at our last post? But it seems like, for everyone but my mom, when the wedding ring goes on, the uniform comes off.

See, really, if you want the absolute truth that I only tell my mom herself, I think my mom is fucking awesome. I’m super proud of her. She’s a rare mythical, mystical creature, like Xena: Warrior Princess. Or a unicorn. You know that line in Shakespeare’s Shrew that’s like, “My
tongue will tell the anger of my heart, or else my heart, concealing it, will break.” It’s been pretty easy to figure out in my fifteen years of life, that the world prefers women who break their own hearts. People might admire strong bitches like Margaret Thatcher the Iron Lady from a distance, but they like, love, and appreciate women who make life easier for everyone else.

My mom doesn’t lie. She’s incapable of lying. The world is black and white, and she doesn’t see grey. She can’t even wrap her head around tact.

If you were her friend, and you said,

“Does this dress make me look fat?”

She’d answer with something like,

“Well, it’s not a great cut for you.”

This is why my mom doesn’t have any friends.

It’s also why she struggles at work. I mean, she also struggles at work because literally every boss she’s ever had, has been a sexist, sexually harassing asshole who didn’t want to have a woman work for him, so there’s that. It’s good she has a steel flak helmet. She spends a lot of time beating her head against the wall.

She only has two rules for me: 1. Make Responsible Choices. And 2. Don’t Lie to Me. Let’s be honest, Make Responsible Choices is kind of a big, complicated rule to unpack at 15 years old. This may be why, tonight, my friends are partying like it’s 1999, and I’m sitting here, on the sidelines, stuck inside my head. And also, I want to be clear with you, rule number 2 isn’t don’t lie. It’s just Don’t Lie to Me (as in her). If I screw up, I don’t get in trouble, as long as I tell her and take responsibility to fix my own screw-up. And, also, we have a code where she helps me lie.

Imagine it’s Friday, after school, and my friends are going out. I’ve figured out it’s going to be a night that goes south fast. Let’s be honest: soldiers are trained to kill. Imagine what they’re
like as fathers. You have to be tough to grow up on a military base. You can’t wuss out. So, I can call my mom at work and say, “Hey, Mom, Heaven wants to know if I can hang downtown tonight, and then we will sleep over at Christy’s?” And my mom will say, “I should be off by 1900 hours, be at the Burger King by 1930 to drive home with me.” But if everyone is mellow and no one is in a criminal frame of mind, I can say, “Hey, mom, can I hang out with Heaven and sleep over at Christy’s tonight?” and my mom will say, “I will pick you up at Christy’s at 0900 in the morning.”

Do you see the difference in how I asked? It’s pretty clever, right? My friends have never figured it out. My friends don’t know I wussed out on them. My bitch mom is just being a bitch, like they expect her to be.

Tonight, I figured it was going to be low-key enough that I could make it through without compromising on my Responsible Decisions. My friends and I are at one of the bars that caters to Americans. The bartenders don’t check IDs for girls with the right hair, clothes, and make-up. The drinking age here is 16, so it doesn’t take much.

I know what you’re thinking: here I am, already, lying to my mom. Hah! You want the crazier truth? My mom taught me to drink. Not that I would ever tell my friends that.

Last summer. We got to Heidelberg about 6 weeks before the first day of my Freshman year. My mom had to report for duty the day after our plane hit the tarmac. My dad had a couple of weeks of leave for the move, so he and I did house hunting together. Buying new sheets and blankets and stuff, and having our household goods delivered. Plus, school registration and the on-post Head Start classes, where they teach you all about the local culture, some basics of the language, and pair you with an appropriate mentor to get you acclimated, before you get thrown in the deep end of the pool that is living in a foreign country.
First week of school, I tried out for cheerleading. Not to brag, but not only did I make it, I made the Varsity Squad. As a Freshman. I’m just telling you again, so you’re clear on what happened.

That weekend, my mom had her first day off in 7 weeks. She had literally worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, since we arrived in country. It was rough. I started to forget what she looks like when she’s not in uniform. We spent the day in sweats watching The Love Boat on British satellite TV. The Love Boat is her favorite show in the world. I think it’s an escapist fantasy, where she wishes she could be Julie the Cruise Director, a competent woman in uniform who is somehow still likable.

Anyway, at lunch time, my mom and I were in the middle of making sandwiches. We got our plates to the table. She got up, walked to the still-mostly-empty-cupboard, and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels. She dug around in an unpacked box and found a couple of my dad’s shot glasses.

My Grandpa Henry, my mom’s dad, drank Jack in back country farm bars, after a long day in the fields. Jack is serious whiskey.

My mom sat down at the table across from me. She filled the two glasses. She picked one up, like a toast.

“All right, kid, here’s the deal,” she said. “This is a tough school. With this varsity cheer business, you’re going to be hanging with an older crowd.”

She nodded toward my glass.

“Try it.”

I picked it up. I took a tiny sip. It burned my lips. I wrinkled my nose, and spit it back out into my napkin.
It wasn’t the first time I’d had alcohol. My mom lets me have a tiny sip of champagne every New Year’s. Whenever we visit Grandpa Henry and Grandma Laura on their farm, if I get sick, Grandma uses peppermint schnaps for a tummy ache and a tiny bit of bourbon in hot tea with lemon for a sore throat. Grandpa always used to let me have a sip of his beer when he first popped the can and it was still icy and foamy. This stuff was strong. Bitter. Kind of awful.

“Why do I have to do this?” I asked.

“These kids drink. I want you to be able to handle yourself. Your girlfriends are going to drink all kinds of sweet, pretty, yummy things. Gin fizzes and punches and fruity cocktails. They taste good. But a colored drink with an umbrella makes you an easy target for a boy with bad intentions. Nobody fucks with a girl who orders Jack and drinks it straight.”

That afternoon, my mom taught me how to drink. The same way Grandpa Henry had taught her, so you can swallow down whiskey and not grimace from the burn. The bottom line, it’s not actually about drinking. It’s about looking tough while other people drink. To succeed, you eat meat sandwiches before you go out, so the fat and oil coats your stomach and you don’t absorb the alcohol as fast. When you’re out, you never take a drink from anyone other than the bartender; you never take a drink unless you pay for it yourself (which means no house party bathtub punch concoctions, ever); you never set your drink down; if you set your drink down, you leave it behind; the only drink you drink is whiskey, neat. And most importantly, most of the whiskey in your glass, you pour out with a flick of the wrist, so you keep a clear head. We flicked a lot of Jack onto our back porch that afternoon.

So here I am, watching Heaven stagger back from the bar with fizzy red Gin Fizz number 5 or 6. Maybe even 7, if she sucked another one down when I wasn’t looking. A guy loops his arm through hers. She looks up at him and smiles. He is tall, lean, not bad looking, although he’s the
least good-looking of the popular crowd. Mostly he’s a senior. His dad is a Full Bird, which is shorthand for a Full Colonel. Since he just turned 17, the age an American can get a driver’s license from the on-post motor vehicles office, he has a new car. I know who this dude is. He has a rep for giving Freshman and Sophomore girls the kind of rep they regret later.

I stand up and walk towards them. Heaven is giggling into his chest. Heaven’s dad is a Career Sergeant. He’s a nice guy, I like Heaven’s parents. But the military is a caste system. A soldier’s rank applies to his wife and kids, and Heaven wears her dad’s enlisted rank like a chip on her shoulder. The least fun part of my life these days is babysitting Heaven, who tries too hard to be popular. Since she grew boobs toward the end of our Freshman year, and discovered tight shirts and black eyeliner, Heaven has learned new ways to get attention.

I loop my arm through her other elbow, the one not attached to him.

“Okay, Heaven, it’s time to go.”

Senior boy pulls her arm out of mine. He brings her into the circle of his arms. He glares at me.

“We’re having fun here.”

“My mom is waiting to drive us all home,” I say.

“What do I give a fuck about your mom?”

He smiles, sweetly.

I smile back. My voice like honey.

“Well, I think last month, when you were crying in the backseat of my mom’s car while she drove you home to your daddy, you gave a fuck about my mom.”

That brand new car of his I told you about? He wrecked it off post, less than a week after he got it. The German Polizei called the MPs to transfer the accident, since he was an American
minor with US plates and a US license. Since he was a Colonel’s baby, when the call came in, the duty officer called my mom directly instead of assigning it to one of the soldiers on call. A couple of his friends saw him crying in the back seat when my mom turned the corner into Colonel’s Quarters. His new nickname is Cry Baby. Like the Johnny Depp movie.

He looks at me. His forehead furrows. He’s trying to figure out what’s going on. Senior boy isn’t too bright.

“Wait, who are you?” he asks.

“I’m Cat.”

I pause for effect.

“Balzac.”

I pause a second time and smile.

“Hey, if you want, like I said, my mom is waiting. I’m sure she’d be happy to give you a ride home. Again.”

My mom spent a lot of money on two rounds of civilian orthodontists to give me perfect Gene Kelly teeth. Sometimes, I smile big because I’m happy. Sometimes, I smile because I can be a bitch, too, like my mom.

He shoves Heaven against me, walks off without a word. Heaven frowns and grunts at me.

“Yeah,” I tell her, “you had more than enough, tonight.”

Heaven shrugs, and then burps in my face. I drag her around as I find the other friends counting on a ride. It’s now 1:45, and I’m leading Heaven plus three others to the parking lot. I know my mom well enough to know that, though she wants to make sure everyone gets home safe after a night of bad decisions, she is still going to be pissed when she sees how pissed-drunk Heaven is. Heaven better not puke in my mom’s car.
Tammy arrived at the NATO Officer’s club at 1300. The hostess, Amy, was a nice Canadian girl, the older sister of one of Catherine’s friends. She immediately led Tammy to their usual booth, but Tammy asked for a small two-person table, instead. Tammy saw Frau Doctor, the German Female Colonel who worked at NATO with Tom, standing at the “please wait to be seated” sign. As Amy led Frau Doctor to the booth Tammy had just declined, where they often all shared lunch, Tammy called out across the room that she and Tom were celebrating their anniversary. This weekday lunch might be as close as she and Tom got to an anniversary dinner. Frau Doctor smiled and nodded in understanding. She was, technically a Frauline, never married. As Tammy understood it, Frau was a term of recognition for her years of service and experience as an engineer, an honorific for an older woman married to her work.

A few minutes later, the bartender approached with an ice bucket, the green top of a bottle just barely showing above the ice. Tammy furrowed her forehead in concern. Even if it was their anniversary dinner, it was a work-day lunch. Although drinks were always served at the Officer’s Club, and many of the tables around her had full wine glasses and tumblers of spirits, Tammy liked to keep a clear head. The bartender turned the bottle to show the Perrier Sparkling Water label.

Tammy turned and looked to the back corner of the room. There was Tom, leaning against the bar, his arms crossed over his chest, one leg crossed over the other ankle. With his dark hair, broad chest, and even broader smile, Tom commanded every room he entered. Tom was the very model of a modern General’s son. He’d grown up in an era of military excess, and he took luxury for granted as his right in life. His childhood had been lived in elaborate Officer’s Quarters, with formal afternoon teas on Sundays after church at the Post Chapel, Officer’s in Dress uniforms,
wives and children in their Sunday best. At West Point, Tom had the unique experience only possible for a smart and unmotivated General’s son. Ordinary cadets slogged, survived, studied endlessly, and marched hours for infractions in cold, wet New York weather. Tom had a genuinely good time. He enjoyed the celebrated status of being the Goat, the cadet who graduates dead last in his class, often through the hard and deliberate work of avoiding hard and deliberate work.

Across the room, Tom winked. Tammy burst out laughing. Tammy had the kind of loud, throaty laugh that made everyone around her turn and look. Tammy often felt self-conscious about her laugh, particularly around women like her mother-in-law Ginny. Ginny was the kind of women who sneezed daintily and laughed with delicate bubbling, lady-like giggles. Still, Tom had told her, early in their courtship, that her laugh was the kind of full-body experience that made him wonder what else she did with such enthusiasm.

Tom and Tammy had met at the Fort Bragg Officer’s Club. They’d quickly become Tom-and-Tammy to everyone on post. Tammy had initially been hesitant, since she’d met Tom’s father The General first. She’d assumed The General was hitting on her, especially after he complemented her shape in her uniform. It was no secret on Bragg that The General and his wife had affairs.

Tammy had learned, through the years, that she had to be careful with unwanted sexual advances from senior officers. The first time she’d been approached by someone who outranked her, she’d known it was wrong. That something should be done. Her male commanding officer liked to run past her apartment, in the middle of his nighttime training run. He would stand outside her bathroom window and call her name, fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes at a time. She complained to his commanding officer, who told her she needed to follow the chain-of-command and report it to her commanding officer. It felt like a sadistic game of who’s on first, because how could she
file a report about her commanding officer to her commanding officer? She tried to do an official incident report with the Military Police, but since she was a new, junior Military Police officer, no one in her office would take the report. She’d tried to report it as stalking to the local police force. They didn’t have jurisdiction. Desperate, she’d reported it to the Inspector General’s (IG) office for investigation. The IG report had concluded: \textit{Lieutenant Tamara Balzac is an educated and professional woman who should be able to manage her interpersonal affairs without outside intervention. Whining and complaining are not befitting an officer, and Lt. Balzac may not be appropriately qualified for future promotion.}

Tammy had assumed The General was hitting on her. She was polite and excused herself as quickly as possible. She knew not to offend the Post Commander. The next time she saw him at the Officer’s Club, he brought over Tom, his eldest son, for an introduction.

It shouldn’t have mattered. Tammy was dating a nice guy, a dentist at the on-post clinic who was solid and stable. She wasn’t interested in romance. She wasn’t interested in the complexities or increased protocol demands of engaging with the post’s First Family. Tom was movie handsome. Tom was charming. Tom was persistent. One evening, while she was on a dinner date with the dentist at the Officer’s Club, the bartender had delivered a bucket of champagne on ice. Tammy had known, from the dentist’s flustered reaction, that he hadn’t ordered the drink and wasn’t sure how to pay for it. The bartender said it was already taken care of. Tammy had looked around. And there had been Tom, leaning against the bar, looking directly at her. He’d winked. Smiled broadly. And then he’d left.

The next day, a dozen red roses were delivered to her office.

Now, across the room, Tom reached behind the bar, and pulled out a dozen red roses. He walked toward the table, pulled out the chair opposite Tammy, and sat down.
“Happy Anniversary, Babe,” he said.

Tammy looked at her husband in the bright afternoon light. He had barely aged in the years they’d been together. A few streaks of silver made his thick, dark hair even more vibrant. A few laugh lines around his eyes made him look softer, kinder, less the cocky young man she’d once tried to resist. Maybe he was softening with age, in ways that would make the years ahead easier than the ones behind them.

Tom slid a small box across the table. Tammy took a deep breath. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful. She didn’t want to have another fight. She didn’t want to ruin another anniversary. When they met, his extravagance had been a novelty. They were the young officer couple at his father’s parties. All those Colonels and Generals and their fancy wives, so different from the hard-working farm couples of her own childhood. The jewelry and clothes he’d bought for presents had helped her feel like she belonged. It’d been a shock to get all his credit card bills after they had married. It had felt like a betrayal to realize she would be paying for that belonging herself. Still, even now, on two Lieutenant Colonel paychecks, she could never enjoy the safe full of jewelry Tom had accumulated through their years of birthdays and anniversaries. The credit card bills always lingered.

She slowly opened the box. Diamond earrings. At least a karat total weight. Tom smiled. He looked at her expectantly. Once, when Catherine had been about eight, the week before Mother’s Day, Tammy had found a small, scrawled note on lavender paper on Tom’s dresser. It read, “Dear Dad. How do you make Mom mad? Buy more jewelry.” He still bought it. Tammy still felt like she was footing the bill.

Tammy felt her teeth clench.

Tom noticed the sharp angle of her jaw, and his eyes narrowed.
“You hate them,” he said.

He wrinkled his nose. He blew out a loud frustrated breath. Across the intimate round table, Tammy smelled the strong mint of Scope. She thought, for a moment, that she smelled something stronger. Tom had learned from his mother to cover a noon Scotch with mouthwash. Tammy shook her head. She forced a smile.

“They’re beautiful … they must have cost a fortune.”

“I got them at the PX. You deserve them!”

Tammy sighed, again. She smiled. He always seemed to try so hard.

“Thank you, honey,” she said. “They are beautiful.”

His frustration dissolved into a smile. He reached for his menu, and handed Tammy hers across the table.
The sunroof is down, one of my cassettes is blaring from the tape deck, and we are literally zooming into the sunset. When we arrived in country, there was a pretty large selection of impressive cars on the used car lot on post. Lots of Beemers and Benzes. Here in Germany, they’re as common as Fords or Chevys. Even the trash trucks chugging along for garbage pickup are luxury vehicles.

My dad fell in love with a silver Porsche 911. A luxury car in any country.

My mom picked out her sturdy Volkswagen Beetle – reliable, maintenance is affordable and easy, and it was super cheap.

If you want to understand my parents, the best thing is for me to tell you about their parents. My mom’s parents, Henry and Laura, are the people I call Grandpa and Grandma. Whenever I can, I spend weeks, months, and entire summers on their farm. Grandma always has a plate of homemade cookies on the counter, and a pitcher of fresh lemonade in the fridge. I help in her garden and when I eat the sweet peas and the cherry tomatoes straight off the plant, she just smiles. At night, she wraps me up in one of her soft, handmade quilts, and we catch fireflies in mason jars with holes in the lid. Grandpa is my best friend. We chop wood together. We braid the horses’ manes. We sit on the front porch swing while we shuck corn and snap green beans. And even though he’s the kind of tough, sunburned farmer who might go hours without saying more than “Yup,” or “Nope,” whenever I say, “I love you Pop-pop,” he puts his big hand on the top of my head, and says, “Me too, kiddo.” At least, he used to.

My dad’s parents are Dick and Ginny. My Grandfather-The-General retired when I was little, but he still bleeds green and when he dies, he’ll be buried in his Dress Blues. My Grandmother-The-Beauty-Queen was Miss North Carolina 1950, when she met young Lt. Balzac
at a Fort Bragg mixer. She still wears her crown and sash to formal events, to remind people that she is very beautiful. We only visit with my dad, and then we stay two nights in a hotel and take all our meals at the Officer’s Club.

This is why my dad drives a Porsche while my mom drives a punch buggy. Also, practically, probably I can guess that my dad cleared their checking account when he paid for the Porsche, and my mom made do with what was left.

This evening, my mom is sleeping off the kind of migraine that working 18-hours-straight tends to induce. My dad is taking me and Carrie onto post for Summerfest.

Dad is singing along with the radio, calling into the night like he is Phil Collin’s backup singer. He has a good voice, and we harmonize pretty well together, so I don’t mind him singing along. As long as it’s pop. Collins or Rick Astley or Wilson Phillips. He’ll sing along with anything, but a middle-aged white dad has no business trying to sing along with Bel Biv Devoe. I can’t actually ask him not to sing with the rappers, so I just leave those cassettes at home to avoid conflict. You know how I said my mom’s main rule for me is that I not lie to her? I have my own rule for my dad, which is Don’t Wake the Beast.

I promise I am not being Oedipal, when I tell you that my dad is good-looking. Movie star handsome. Like, if you pictured Richard Gere in his dress uniform at the end of An Officer and a Gentleman, or Tom Cruise smirking as he walks down the tarmac in flight gear in Top Gun, you’d have a fair idea of what my dad looks like. To be totally clear, to me, he’s a gross, embarrassing dad who walks around in his tighty-whities and farts at the dinner table. But I see how the world looks at him. How women treat him. We pretty much never wait in line for anything, our drinks are always refilled before we ask, and we always get to board airplanes early. Waitresses, store clerks, and flight attendants press their breasts up toward him while whispering breathily in his
face, “how can I help you?” Also, every single one of my friends adores my dad, is like starry-eyed in love with him, and they all want to be in the backseat when we roll up in his Porsche.

Summer evenings stay bright late here, so even though its 1800 hours by the time we pull up to the security gate of Patrick Henry Village, it’s lit up like noon. PHV is the main residential post for Heidelberg, and this is where most of the community activities – like the bowling alley, the main movie theater, and the youth club – are located. A couple of times a year, the post lets a collection of German food vendors and sales vendors and ride owners set up along the main drag for two weeks at a time. They create a Summerfest and an Oktoberfest so good that even the German locals line up with IDs to get in and be part of it all.

The food stands and ticket counters glitter with lights. The rides sparkle in the sky like fireworks going up, around, back-and-forth. Glittery fairy lights post the corners of the beer tent. The smell of bier, which is stronger, denser, and wheat-ier than the cans of Bud my grandpa used to crack open back stateside on his fishing boat, fill the air.

The air has a tinge of evening chill, which is perfect, since my jean jacket is both cute and super-functional with enough pockets to hold my ID and my dollars and my Deutsch Marks (DM) and my lip balm and my tiny bottle of hair spray and my tiny travel brush. A few months ago, my mom cut up an old pair of my jeans and sewed extra pockets with Velcro closures on the inside of my jean jacket. I don’t have to carry a purse and I can keep all the essentials handy.

I love German fests. Normally, when we go out on weekends, walking the streets until 2 am, singing Like a Prayer at the top of our lungs, I feel like a Goddamn babysitter. I have to make sure everyone makes it home safely. That Cristy isn’t puking in an alley alone. That Heaven isn’t blowing yet another senior behind a trash can. Since fests are held on post, they go by US federal law. Strict ID check for alcohol. During the two-weeks each of Summerfest and Oktoberfest, we
act like kids again, and I get a break. If you puke it’s because you had too much cotton candy before you went on the roller coaster.

The crowd is a mix of German nationals and American Joes, German and American families. Little kids on their dads’ shoulders. Older kids waiting in line with their parents and then running off with a handful of ride tickets. You can tell the American tourists who have made their way here from a guidebook or a travel agent, because they are wearing lederhosen. The guidebooks say that if you wear lederhosen, you will blend in with the crowd. The only other people who wear lederhosen at fests are the oom-pah-pah bands on the stage.

The lines in front of us are steady for the food vendors selling cotton candy and candy apples, pretzels, brochen hot dogs, and warm cups of Mezzo Mix. Carrie and I walk my dad to the Bier tent and help him get situated, which means 1 mug of bier in a frosted glass, a couple of cans of coke, a buttered pretzel, a couple of Wienerschnitzel, and a seat near the stage and the band. When he’s playing chaperone duty, he sticks to his one drink limit, and he’ll stay near his seat so I can find him easily in case of catastrophe. We are free until we have to report back at 2330 hours for the ride home. Or when the money runs out, whichever comes first. He is doing his dad-hug to me and his dad-of-a-friend-shoulder-punch to Carrie when we see Heaven, slutted up in a see-through black lace blouse, sitting on a GI’s lap in the back corner. Heaven’s family lives in the large-family enlisted quarters here on PHV, over by the middle school. She’s probably been here, scoping out the Joes, since the bier tent opened mid-afternoon.

We head to the corner, and try to cajole Heaven into coming with us. We beg and plead, but she’s getting too much male attention to listen. I reminder her my dad is up front, just in case she starts to get in trouble and needs help, but she waves us off. I make sure the GI Joes she’s flirting with see me point out my dad, so they won’t be dumb enough to slip her a drink with at
least one adult she knows in the vicinity. We tell Heaven that she better find us in the next hour, or else.

We head out of the tent, into the crowd, and straight to the Hopster, our favorite ride, the best part of every Summerfest and Oktoberfest. The Hopster would not, could not, exist at any fair ground or carnival or amusement park in the States. The line is short, and we get there right as a crowd exits. We each pay the vendor a DM, and head through the metal gate. We climb into a big metal bucket, about 12-feet in diameter, with a thin metal bench ringing the inside rim. We grip our fingers tight to the metal edge beneath our butts. There are no straps, no handrails, nothing at all. Just a thin metal stadium seat and the strength of your fingers on the seat and the strength of your legs and butt to keep you on the seat. It’s early and not very crowded, so there is space between us and the people on our left and right sides. The guy closes the gate and the bucket begins to spin. Slowly at first. Then faster. Then hopping while spinning, like someone gone crazy on a pogo stick.

Carrie loses her grip and slides off the seat into the open metal-floor of the center. She is crawling on her hands and knees trying to make her way back to the seat against the spinning and the hopping, but she keeps falling and losing her grip. When she gets close enough, I stick out my leg and she grabs my ankle. With each hop, she pops up in the air, holding onto my ankle and flying like a kite off a string. I fly Carrie-the-kite for an insane amount of time, at least 3 or 4 minutes, because you get your money’s worth on German fair rides. As the Hopster begins to spin slower and slower, Carrie is able to climb up and into the seat next to me. We are laughing like crazy as we come to a stop.

We look out. The rest of our friends are still missing in action, Heaven has not yet appeared, and there is still no line for the Hopster.
“Again?” Carrie chokes out between laughs.

“Sure,” I shrug.

We stay in our seats, digging in our pockets for another DM coin each, and waiting for the guy to come around and take our money for the next round.
The sun’s ray pressed heat into her back, like a good massage. Tammy felt herself sinking and dissolving into the lounge chair. That morning, Tammy, her husband Tom, and their daughter Catherine had woken up early. They were staying at the Guest House on Camp Darby, and they’d grabbed a quick breakfast from the Snack Bar near the Darby Commissary and PX. They’d gotten directions to the American Beach. As they drove, the coastline was beautiful, the deep blue Mediterranean sparkling in the early morning light.

At the beach, after showing their military ID cards to enter, they walked through the sea grass pathway onto a dirty beach. Tammy had heard, before they’d driven down to Italy, that conditions at the American Beach were questionable. There was only a small patch of sand and shore access, just before the shipping port of Livorno. But upon arrival, conditions were more than questionable. The trash cans were overflowing. Shadows of oil and diesel dulled the water. Damp seagrass crowded the shoreline. Instead of the beach smell of salt and the faint coconut scent of Coppertone, the air smelled musty and dank.

Tammy had wrinkled her nose and shaken her head.

“Nope,” Catherine had said.

Tom had laughed.

The three had turned around in unison, a well-trained about-face, and marched back through the seagrass. Catherine hut-two-three-foured under her breath, as she’d done on family walks since she was little. They had loaded back in the car. They drove farther along the crescent drive of Tirrenia’s beach front until they found a private beach with a sign on the street advertising day-passes available for sale. The daily fee included 2 lounge chairs and a tiny cabana.
Tammy turned over, onto her back, and pulled the hood of the lounge chair over her head like a private umbrella. A spot on this private beach made the vacation feel like a real get-away. She looked out onto the water, as crystalline and blue as an aquamarine stone, not a spot of oil in sight. The sand glimmered like powdered sugar. Rake lines from a morning clean-up were still visible along the shore. Tammy could see a small, older Italian man putting around, straightening chairs, raking out smooth spots, keeping the perfect vacation spot in an ideal state.

Her daughter, Catherine, stood about waist deep in the water, but she must have been at least a half-mile out. The shelf of the Mediterranean was a slow gradual increase, and the water was warm, like a gigantic bathtub. Catherine was wearing her favorite swimsuit, a neon yellow Body Glove swimsuit, high cut on the hips, black scuba material on each side, a zipper that ran the length of the front. So different from the ill-fitting hand-me-down thrift-store swimsuits Tammy had worn at the same age. Catherine was talking to two young men, dark haired, in the fitted swim briefs that young European men wore. Even at the distance Tammy could tell Catherine was laughing, from the wide smile on her face and the backward toss of her hair.

Tammy laughed at herself. Before she’d come to Europe with the Army, her only exposure had been Roman Holiday and Three Coins in the Fountain. To a midwestern farm girl, Hollywood made it seem like everyone around the world spoke English, just with accents. She’d been shocked to realize how few people spoke English, and how much she struggled trying to make do with her little phrasebooks. Catherine had finally helped her figure out, with hours of practice, how to ask important questions like “Where’s the toilet,” and “How much does it cost.” Tammy preferred learning from her daughter, who never made her feel stupid, rather than her husband, who always did.
Catherine picked up languages and social norms easily. Enough to buy things at outdoor markets and order off menus for the family, and get directions when they were traveling. She was a pretty, charming teen-ager, and Tammy had learned if she let Catherine speak for the family, they got better food, better tables at restaurants, better prices in the open-air markets. Catherine could get by with bits of French and bits of German, a smattering of Spanish, and based on the giggling out in the water, enough Italian to flirt with teen-age boys. Their daughter seemed to be the best of both of them. She had Tom’s charm and ease, without his arrogance. She had Tammy’s practical common sense, without her insecurities. Tammy hoped her daughter’s life would be better, easier, than her own.

Tammy looked up and down the beach, at the collection of mostly Europeans on holiday. It was August, holiday month in Europe, and resort towns tended to fill up with Europeans from the Northern Countries heading toward the coasts. There were bikinis and speedos, full body suits and fitted shorts. Some of the women were topless, and many of the babies ran around completely naked. She hadn’t seen so many naked swimming kids since she was a small child in the 1940s, splashing in cold farm-country lakes with her cousins, their mothers waiting along the shore with saltshakers to make the leeches fall off.

It was certainly different from the scene at an Officer’s Club pool back in the states, with the men (all officers) in their trunks and the women (all wives, except for her) in their skirted one-piece mom-suits, and the children all in swimsuits and water wings. It was nice to relax in the heat, in her bandeau-topped bikini, and not worry that she was going to run into someone she worked with or, worse, someone who worked for her, or even worse, the wife of someone who worked with her or for her. Off-duty among her fellow soldiers, she felt different and alone; off-duty among the soldier’s wives, she felt like an intruder.
Tammy had given up, years before, decades before, on women, on friendships, on any hope of community. She had given up feeling like she belonged or was part of something. At work, she had to work harder just to be equal. Even when she was more, she knew they still saw her as less. Outside of work, in jeans and a button-up shirt at the PX buying toilet paper or the commissary buying groceries, in a silk dress and her best hat at church with her husband and kid on Sundays, she was always different. Outside. Never just an officer, though she was an officer. Never just an officer’s wife, though in fact, to Tom, she was. She belonged nowhere. The best she could do was to survive.

But here, on the beach, her skin feeling hot and soft and starting to brown, the scent of Coppertone and coconuts, the chorus of so many different languages, she belonged. She was just another tourist. Just another woman on the beach with her husband and kid.

Tammy knew exactly where her kid was. She put her hand over her eyes and searched the beach for her husband’s tall, lanky shape. She wondered when Tom had wandered off. She could assume he was chatting up one of the topless women. She must have dozed off for a while. Her stomach grumbled. She figured it was near lunch time, based on the sun overhead. A dark-skinned young man was walking along the water, bags draped over his neck and around both shoulders.


Tammy sat up, lifted her arm over her head, like she’d done as a kid at the circus with her father to buy peanuts. As the young man walked toward her, she dug in the bag under her chair, and pulled out Lira.

“Ahh, three? Tre?” she said, hesitantly.

“I speak English,” he said. His voice was beautiful and melodic, deep and resonant, with a hint of England. He smiled. “Three, yes.”
She handed him the Lira, rounding the total up to tip, and he handed her three fresh coconuts, still whole and furry. She looked at the coconuts, suddenly unsure how to actually eat them. He must have sensed her hesitation.

“Would you like me to open them?” he almost sang.

“Yes, please, thanks!” Tammy replied.

He set down his bags on the beach. He took one coconut from her, and held it firmly in the palm of his large left hand, like a basketball player palming the ball. He lifted his right hand like a blade, and with one swift karate chop to the center eye of the coconut, the coconut split clean open. He rotated it quickly, keeping the halves together along the equator so that the coconut milk stayed inside the bottom half, like a bowl. He smiled at her as she gaped in shock. He repeated the process with the other two. Tammy carefully balanced two of the coconuts on the empty lounge chair, so Catherine and Tom could each have a snack when they wandered back.

The young man picked up his bags and walked back toward the shoreline, walking with his ankles in the water, singing off into the distance.

Tammy carefully pulled the top half of her coconut off, and placed it in her lap. She’d never had fresh coconut before, just the shreds in the bag for baking or at an ice cream sundae bar. Slowly, she lifted the bottom half of the coconut like a cup. She drank the warm milk down. It was sweet and fragrant, like a melted vanilla popsicle. She pulled a piece of the coconut meat out of the shell; it was tender and melted in her mouth. She took a deep breath and looked out at the horizon. The scent of coconut mixed with the salt and sunscreen in the air, and she felt fully and completely relaxed, free from the constant surveillance of life under military occupation.
We are zooming down the highway in my dad’s Porsche. Yes, again. This time, it’s closing in on midnight, and my mom is with us. My dad loves the Autobahn because there are no speed limits, and he can put the speed into speedster. My mom hates the autobahn for the same reason.

Eight hours ago, we were on vacation on the beach in Tuscany. Now, we are at war. Not me, of course, I’m a fifteen-year-old American girl in the late 20th century, and even in other places and other countries where young kids go to war, it’s usually only boys, unless it’s a girl who cuts her hair, pretends to be a boy, and Joan of Arc’s it.

Technically, we’re not really at war, because there has been no congressional declaration. If you want to get technical like that, the entire Vietnam War was just the Vietnam Conflict. What I know, is that as far as the United States Army is concerned, as soon as the 82nd Airborne Division has boots on the ground, we are at war. As far as my dad is concerned, the entire United States Army is the 82nd Airborne Division. When he’s feeling generous, he includes other combat arms soldiers in the Army. When he’s out-of-control drunk, he gives long, boring, pull-my-hair-out lectures about how real soldiers are boots-on-the-ground infantrymen, because armor guys won’t do anything unless they’re inside the protection of a tank. My Grandfather-The-General has all kinds of ribbons and medals and commendations from boots on the ground in Vietnam and Korea. My father’s grandfather was boots on the ground in World War II. My father’s destiny, if you ask him, is to be the next generation of Balzac men with boots on the ground. To my dad, everyone else, even if they are in uniform, is a Rear Echelon Mother Fucker. Including my mom. Though let’s be honest: he may have earned his Ranger tab, and have thousands of jumps under his belt, but he’d never be man enough to say that to her face.
War is now, also, brewing between my parents. I can feel it coming. It’s like the way the air feels different before a storm.

Eight hours, ago, we were sitting at a little table outside a little ice cream shop in the heat of an August afternoon. I was licking a gelato limon, which is so fundamentally different and better than ice cream, it shouldn’t even translate. Gelato should be one of those words like baguette and sushi and salsa that doesn’t have an English equivalent. I mean, yes, I learned in Spanish that technically salsa translates to sauce, but if you want salsa, you ask for salsa, because there is no English word for it.

It was around 4 pm, 1600 hours, the time of day in Italy where everyone takes a nap to escape the heat of the day. All the shops and restaurants are closed up until evening. The ice cream shop was open. There was a guy selling water bottles and beach towels from a little stand near the entrance to the beach. There were a few obnoxiously loud people walking around who were obviously American tourists. They looked like movie extras, with their big fanny packs and white sneakers. The thing about actually living in Europe is that you learn pretty quickly how not to be so American all the time.

Across the plaza, the jewelry store was locked up but they’d forgotten to turn off their TV. I could tell they were playing BBC news by satellite because the little tickertape of news running across the bottom of the screen was in English. Suddenly, I noticed the too-familiar look of the 82nd red berets on the TV screen. This is not something you see often on the news when you’re living away from Ft. Bragg, unless shit is going down. And then, the phone rang in the ice cream shop. And I knew. My heart dropped into my feet and my whole body went cold.

This was the first vacation we’ve had since we’d arrived in Europe over a year ago. My mom has gotten a day off here and there. A few times she’s had a whole actual weekend off, as if
we were normal people. This was our first vacation, our first time driving more than an hour away. Even on vacation, my mother’s leash is one hour long. Whenever we go somewhere, as soon as we get there, she finds a phone, calls the duty officer, and leaves the number where she can be reached. Whenever she is leaving a location, she calls the duty officer, tells them how long she will be out of reach. She calls back in as soon as she is at the next location with a phone. Today, before we left the hotel to walk the beach promenade, she had to call. When we decided to get ice cream, she paid the shop owner to use his phone, and called the duty officer to give him the number.

The shop owner stuck his head outside.

“You are Cor-o-nel Balzac?” he asked, looking at my dad.

“Yes, I am,” my dad said, pushing his chair back and standing up.

My mom just sat there a moment. She is used to this. The people assuming. My dad overthinking his own importance. She bears the weight of my dad’s fragile ego in addition to everything else she carries in her rucksack. When she is rested, when they’ve had a good day together, when they are happily married, she bears it gracefully. My dad took two steps toward the shop, his back toward us. He stopped. His shoulders drooped. He turned back.

“It’s probably for you,” he said.

My mom stood up, and quickly covered the distance with her long-legged stride.

“You Lady Cor-o-nel Balzac?” the owner asked, his head tilted.

“I am Colonel Balzac,” she answered.

I walked across the square toward the jewelry shop TV to get a better look. I took a deep breath. Vacation was over. Even worse was how Dad was going to take this. I thought about delaying the inevitable.

“Hey, Dad?” I called.
He pitched the remainder of his cone into the trash bin with an angry grunt and walked toward me. He stopped close in front of the store, staring at BBC through the reflective glass. He started pacing and stomping and scratching the back of his head.

I put my hand on his arm to get his attention. He didn’t look down at me.

“They’re dropping in near Kuwait,” he said through clenched teeth.

He pounded his fist so hard on the metal gate covering the glass, I braced for it to shatter.

“Goddamn NATO bullshit. Goddamn your mother. Goddamn it!”

My dad stomps his way to a metal trashcan, his face disfigured with rage. He kicks so hard it rings down the street, and I look around, hoping no Carabinieri are in range.

Here’s the thing. I love Europe. I have loved having a few days on the beach in fucking Tuscany. What are we, in a movie? I love Heidelberg. I am not joking when I tell you that not only did I get to go to Senior prom a few months ago, as a freshman, but that the prom was held in the Heidelberg Castle. Prom. In a castle. Europe is unreal.

You know what I love more than Europe? I love my dad in Europe. To him, his NATO job is a bullshit desk-jockey impersonation, that gets him dangerously close to rear echelon mother fucker territory. He is reminded of this every morning when he has to put on a camouflage cap instead of his red beret. But over the last year in Germany, as Dad has gotten farther and farther away from his red-bereted, tobacco-chewing, jumping-out-of-airplanes self, he has become less and less a pointillism caricature of a soldier and more a real person. An actual dad.

Heroes are a lot like impressionist art: best viewed from a distance.

My dad really wants to be a hero. He is, at best, in truth, a middling soldier. He is a charming fast talker who does just barely good enough work to not get kicked out. Everywhere we
go, everyone knows our name. They all know, admire, and adore my Grandfather-The-General. They all expect my dad to live up to his dad. He doesn’t.

Every few years, the Army Personnel Office finds a way to stick Dad at the same new base as mom so we can be co-located. Sometimes, he gets lucky and he gets to wear his beret and earn his jump pay. I like life better when he’s not lucky.

Now, we are racing down the highway in the middle of the night, because my mom has to report for duty at 0600.

Until an hour ago, I was holding a very large clock on my lap. It was too big to fit in the trunk with the suitcases. I didn’t feel comfortable letting it slide around on the seat. I shouldn’t have bought the clock, but I wanted it for Grandpa. Grandpa Henry would have hung it over the mantel. The dark fir green exactly matches one of Grandma’s hand-sewn quilts. Grandpa loved clocks, and this is some crazy clock. It has dials all around it, showing the temperature in Fahrenheit and Celsius, and the indoor humidity level. It has the main clock, which even has a second hand, and three smaller clocks that you can set with the time in New York City, London, and Tokyo. It is worth every penny of my saved allowance. I just wish he was still alive, so I could give to him.

An hour ago, I needed a bathroom, and my dad had to track down a gas station with a real bathroom. Germany is great: every bathroom has a paid attendant who mops the whole place down after pretty much every single person. You never walk into a piss-smelling mess like you get on road trips back in the states. Southern Europe is dicey. I don’t care if it flushes, a hole in the ground is a hole in the ground. At the gas station, my mom bought road trip snacks: bottles of real Coca-Cola and Orange Fanta, bags of chips, blocks of Ritter Sport chocolate.
When we got back to the car, my dad was leaning against the side of the car with a wide smirking smile, the kind he described as shit-eating.

“What’s up, Tom? Mom asked.

“I’ll tell you on the road,” he said.

He unlocked the front passenger door, and Mom slid in. I walked around with him to the driver’s side. When I tried to climb in behind his seat, the back bench was filled with boxes and my clock was precariously balanced, ready to fall.

I scrunched in and repositioned my clock. Dad turned the key in the ignition. The smooth precision of German engineering hummed quietly. As he pulled out, Mom looked back into the space behind her and noticed all the boxes.

“What the hell, Tom?” she said.

“You’ve been saying you wanted to get a camcorder, and we needed a new VCR. The guy even threw in a new CD deck which I can set up for Cat in her room with my old speakers.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

My mom snorted. I know that tone.

“Trafficking stollen goods. My own soldiers are going to arrest us,” she said.

I carefully turned my clock sideways, slid it forward over the stick shift between the two front seats. I asked my mom to hold it.


“Relax, babe. Chill the fuck out. I paid cash in Lira. They think we’re tourists.”

“Tourists drive rental cars with European plates. Not USA plates.”
I dug through the packing tape of the SONY box with my fingernail. Carefully, I opened the top edge of the VCR box. The VCR looked weird. A faded black color, not quite the shiny plastic of electronics. The texture felt off, too.

“Mom, can you put on the overhead light for a minute?”

It was a big block of wood painted flat black with spray paint. Tiny white details painted on. It was a fantastic replica, down to the SONY logo on the front.

“Ahh, Mom, I don’t think you need to worry …”

I started laughing before I could finish my sentence.

I pushed it forward on the arm rest, and my mom twisted around. She leaned in, then felt the block.

“Tom, how much did you spend for this block of wood?” my mom asked.

Dad turned back, reaching back with his hand toward the wooden VCR. He almost hit Mom in the face as he jerked through the space of the car.

“Tom, get your eyes on the road and your hand on the wheel,” Mom growled.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” my dad said. “I’m getting my money back. I will beat the shit out of that asshole. Keep an eye out for the next exit.”

“Tom,” Mom said.

Her voice was blizzard cold. When Mom sounds the calmest, she is the angriest. This was her don’t-fuck-with-me Colonel voice.

“I have to be at work at 0600. A war has just broken out. The world doesn’t have time for your temper tantrum. You are an idiot who tried to buy technology at a gas station. You should be glad you’re not trafficking stolen goods. You will keep driving. I swear to God that if you turn this car around, I will leave you to walk home. Are we clear?”
You probably don’t believe me that my mother threatened to make my dad walk home a couple hundred miles. My dad has been left on the side of the road for a variety of things: getting into fist fights with strangers at gas stations, shooting three more shots of ouzo when she told him to stop drinking and he refused to get in the passenger seat, driving 100 miles per hour in a 50 mile per hour zone. I am never surprised by the stupid things he does. My dad has not learned to take my mother’s threats seriously. I take all of her threats seriously.

I reach forward. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Dad, please,” I say. “Please. Please just drive us home.”

One of my earliest memories is wrapping my arms, one around each parent’s legs, and crying while saying please. I have been a marriage counselor since I was two years old. I look up at the ceiling and swallow back the bitter taste of my tears. In case you don’t know, this is a helpful strategy: if you look up and swallow hard, no one will see you cry. My dad keeps his foot heavy on the gas pedal. His shoulders are tense and high, almost to his ears. He merges to the center lane, away from the exits. My mom chomps her gum, loudly, her teeth click-click-clicking her anger in the otherwise silent car. This is what Sartre gets wrong. Hell is not vaguely other people. Hell is not vaguely other people. Hell is precisely being stuck in the back seat of a small car with your angry, fuming parents.
On a Sunday afternoon, bleary-eyed with exhaustion, Tammy jerked the vacuum back and forth over the foyer rug. Over its roar, she could hear her daughter, Catherine, and a chorus of teen-girl voices belting along to the stereo upstairs. She switched the vacuum off and jerked the cord from the outlet, quickly looping the cord around the handle and parking the vacuum beside the clothes tree. Crossing things off her to-do list always made her feel accomplished, but household chores were never crossed off, they just loomed for next time, and always took more time than she had to spare.

Her mother-in-law hated her habit of keeping cleaning supplies handy. It was unbecoming of an officer’s home. Ginny Balzac, both a General’s Daughter and a General’s Wife, had never, in her 65 years, scrubbed dishes or mopped a floor. She had always had the luxury of at least a housekeeper who made dinner, and sometimes both a maid and a cook. Ginny had a perfectly clean house with no trace of equipment.

Tammy kept supplies in sight and on hand, and made do with every spare minute: vacuuming for five minutes, keeping a rag and spray bottle of cleaner in each bathroom and the kitchen, throwing laundry into the washer and the dryer in her bathroom as she got in and out of the shower. It was yet another way Tammy failed to meet her mother-in-law’s expectations. Ginny was the consummate Wives Club Volunteer. She looked down on women who worked for money as unladylike fools. In Ginny’s eyes, Tammy being an Army Officer when she and Tom were dating was a cute anecdote to tell her friends. Tammy remaining an Army Officer after marriage, and having the audacity to consistently get promoted before her own husband, who was also Ginny’s oldest and favorite son, was worse than Original Sin. Sometimes, Tammy felt the best
part of being stationed overseas was the ocean between her and Ginny’s raised-eyebrow-of-disapproval.

As Tammy wiped down the kitchen counters, she could hear Catherine and her friends upstairs, singing another song. Tammy could hear her daughter’s voice ring out clear and loud above the others. She smiled. Catherine did everything well. Tammy was glad she spent their extra money on lessons instead of housekeepers: piano, voice, dance, plus scrimping to save for college. She didn’t ever want Catherine to struggle the way she had. She wanted Catherine to always know she belonged. To feel good enough.

The girls crescendoed to the chorus: And if this world runs out of lovers. We’ll still have each other. Nothing’s gonna stop us now.

Tammy stopped. She and Tom used to do the weekend breakfast dishes together. Tom would splash bubbles at her playfully. They used to do the grocery shopping together, too, treating a bi-weekly outing to the commissary like a date, cracking jokes over the Charmin. Now, she was standing, alone, in her kitchen, cleaning up breakfast dishes. Tom had gone to the commissary alone with the 10-foot list she’d written out when she’d gotten home at 0500, after another 18-hour shift.

Her hours had gotten worse since all the deployments started. They didn’t have time to both do the groceries and both do the dishes. She needed a nap. It wasn’t that they were avoiding each other. It wasn’t that Tom couldn’t stand to be in the same room with her, couldn’t stand to look at her. It wasn’t that Tom was so angry, suddenly, for the first time, that she was her, an officer, instead of his mother, an officer’s wife. Was it?

She wondered how long it had been since she’d believed so truly, purely, naively, and completely in love. Of course she still loved Tom. Of course he still loved her. It just wasn’t love.
like the song. Anymore. It wasn’t love that could bring a life-sized doll to life. It wasn’t the unstoppable love of age 15, wide-eyed and a full future ahead.

Not anymore. Not for a long time.

Tammy brushed her eyes, they burned and blurred. She blinked hard and stopped the tears from falling. She grabbed the rag on the back of the kitchen sink. She began to scrub the breakfast dishes.

The distance between 15 and 45 was far greater than the space of just 30 years.

When the dishes were done, Tammy returned to the foyer. Catherine’s designated navigator bag was still in the corner. The bag was denim with leather straps, a gift from Grandpa Henry, filled with the maps and notes from their aborted Italian vacation. Tammy hadn’t had the heart to unpack it. She guessed Catherine hadn’t wanted to, either. Tammy unzipped the bag. She pulled out the stack of maps, rubber banded together, each precisely folded to what Tammy knew were its relevant parts. Catherine had learned maps from Henry, serving as navigator on summer cross-country road trips in his brown-striped station wagon. She’d taken to maps as soon as he placed them in her tiny three-year-old hands, turning the map to match the terrain like a miniature member of an orienteering expedition. From road-side motels, Tammy’s mom and dad would call her. Catherine’s little voice would tell her all about her adventures with Pop-Pop and Grandma. Tammy wished she had been part of those memories.

The back of her neck throbbed, a tight knot. She rolled her head in slow circles, trying to loosen the pain. Henry had died six months before. The General hadn’t approved Tammy’s request for bereavement time to take Catherine home for the funeral. He said she was still too new in her command and he didn’t want to disrupt the unit. Typical Army bullshit.
Tammy thought about how different life might be. She wondered, sometimes, at least three times a day, if she was making the right choices. She and Tom had talked about retiring at Leavenworth, especially since Kansas would put them in driving distance of her parents. She was just at twenty years of service, eligible to retired, just as they arrived, and Tom was closing in on it. Tammy had even put out some feelers with the local police force about jobs. And then it happened. On a Tuesday. In March.

Her commanding officer had called her into his office as soon as she arrived that morning, before she’d even taken off her outer jacket or unpacked her briefcase. Her heart had been racing as she’d stepped into his office.

“Do you want the good news or the great news?” he’d asked her.

She’d braced herself. Prepared her nerves. Was he going to ask her to join him for a weekend away, yet again? He had done that at the end of every single one-on-one meeting she’d had under his command. Was he going to tell her yet another lavish sex dream, as he did at least once a week?

She stood at attention, as close to the door as possible.

“Your choice, Sir,” she answered.

“Well, the good news is, there is no bad news! And the great news is, Congratulations Colonel Balzac! You’re going to get those Eagles on your shoulders!”

Tammy had been shocked. Stunned. She had hoped. Every Lieutenant Colonel hoped. She had, occasionally, visualized, standing in front of the mirror, holding a pair of Eagles over her shoulders, willing the promotion boards to recognize her excellence and pick her up for promotion from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel. But she hadn’t, really, ever believed it to be possible. She’d met so few full Colonels who were women. She had never met a married mother who had made
Colonel. The years of balancing home and the unrelenting demands of work had been exhausting. She had resigned herself to being grateful to have survived.

“You heard me, didn’t you, Tammy girl?” he had asked.

For a moment, she was grateful for his momentary professionalism, his seeming lapse in treating her like a girl instead of an officer. And then he ruined it, rushing at her, pinching her cheek, and slapping her ass as he rushed her out the door.

“Well, you’re my only one on the list. I’ve gotta few hearts I gotta break today before the Stars and Stripes puts it in print tomorrow. Hopefully, we won’t have to do suicide watch tonight for those suckers. Once you pin those Eagles on, we’ll have to find a nest and celebrate like two birds.”

He had winked. She had swallowed back the bile rising in her throat and walked away in silence. Tammy had learned silence was her only option.

No one believed her. If they believed her, they didn’t care.

She had learned, the hard way, that it didn’t even pay to tell her husband.

The sharp buzz of the dryer finishing its load cut through her head. There were three more loads waiting in the bathroom upstairs. As she walked through the master bedroom to the bathroom, she stopped at her dresser, where the pair of silver Eagles sat in a small wooden box, still waiting. She picked them up and placed them on her shoulders, looking at her future self in the mirror.

It would have been hard enough to come into the Provost Martial job as a newly pinned Colonel. It would have been hard enough to come into the position as the first female officer to serve in the role. It would have been hard enough to be the senior ranking American female officer on post. She had survived the last year as an O5 in an O6 slot. As Acting Provost Martial instead
of the Provost Martial. She had navigated the disdain and disregard of all the other department heads and commanders, all the O6 men who refused to accept her as their peer. Every day, the fatigue bore deeper into her bones.

She was scheduled, finally, to pin on Eagles on 1 September. She knew, with a crushing sadness, that they weren’t going to change anything.

Tammy put the Eagles back in the box. She walked into the bathroom, and began to pull clean clothes out of the dryer.
Today is a teacher training day, and we get an hour for lunch. The plan is to meet by the flagpole as soon as the bell rings, so we have max time possible to walk over to Campbell Barracks. We want to get some BK at the food court. That’s the plan, but then Heaven spazzes out on us.

She’s standing under the flagpole, twirling her hair around her finger and biting her lip when I walk up, so I know something is up.

“She’s thinking you could talk them into letting me through?” Heaven says, batting her eyelashes at me.

As if that bullshit works on me.

“Nope, no, and no way. I can’t, I won’t, and I don’t,” I say.

I don’t even know how that’s possible in the current op climate. That’s operational climate, to civilians, and what I mean is: there is a war going on. There are ID checkpoints and bag checks around every corner. How has she made it to school and through lunch without her ID card? But whatever.

“I was thinking you could talk them into letting me through?” Heaven says, batting her eyelashes at me.

As if that bullshit works on me.

“Nope, no, and no way. I can’t, I won’t, and I don’t,” I say.

I don’t trade on my mom’s name. That’s not how I roll. Because her life is hard enough without me getting her in trouble. There are pissed-off men behind every corner just waiting for a chance to screw her over. Maybe literally and figuratively. I have noticed, from the way they sneer at her, that there are a lot of men on post who seem both to hate my mother and to lust after her.

“Okay, well, whatever. I’ll figure it out. Just don’t be a narc, right?” Heaven says.

“Yeah, whatever,” I say.

I don’t like breaking rules. There is only so much you can do to stop others from breaking them.
We walk down the sidewalk, heading the short walk from the high school campus, which is off post and surrounded by a mix of military housing and Germany houses, and currently also surrounded by sandbags and other make-shift barricades, toward Campbell Barracks, the fully enclosed NATO post. As we approach the gate, I slow down.

“Do we know the MPs today?” I ask.


I peek through the wall of my friends at two young MPs. I don’t know them. That’s good, if I don’t know them, they don’t know me, and they won’t think I’m asking them to make an exception. Even worse would be if they think they are supposed to call my mom for official permission to break protocol.

Heaven walks up to the sidewalk entrance, swinging her hips obnoxiously. Since her boobs filled in, her fake confidence has skyrocketed. As my mom would say, she thinks her shit is pink ice cream. Heaven cocks her head and her hip to the right side, and flips her hair over her shoulder. She gives a half smile to the two MPs.

One of the MPs walks up to Heaven.

“I kind of have a problem, can you help me?” she whispers, trying to be sexy.

“How can I help?”

“I totally spazzed and left my ID card at home. But I am dying for some BK. Can you let me in?”

The MPs face is blank and serious. He scrunches up his face, like he is thinking about it.

“Well, how can I really know that you’re really American?” he asks.
His voice is fake-serious voice. He is surprisingly cute under his helmet. He pauses and frowns, like he’s waiting for an answer. Then he chuckles and smiles.

“I know. You all can serenade me with the National Anthem. I’ve always wanted a group of girls to serenade me, you know.”

Heaven sighs, like it’s a big inconvenience to her. As if this isn’t all her fault. She wraps her hair around her finger, and cracks her gum. She looks back at us, and then starts to sing. We all join in. By “proof through the night,” both MPs are singing, too. The cute one shouts, “Play Ball,” when we all get to the end.

Heaven cuts into and through the gates before he can say anything else or stop her. The rest of us pull out our ID cards and flash them, one by one. I’m last in line, and as I hold out my ID card in my fingertips, Heaven blurts out.

“You kind of had to let me through, you know. Her mom’s like, your boss, and shit.”

The other girls laugh.

I sigh and frown at her. I notice the guard, peering at me. His eyes are clear sky blue. Intense. He takes my ID card, and squints at it. He’s looking at the sponsor’s name block. Where it says, in clear block type, BALZAC, TAMARA CATHERINE.

“You’re new, right?”

“Yup,” he says.

“Ignore her,” I say. “You don’t have to do anything except follow orders. I did not ask you to break protocol.”

“Understood, kid,” he says.

He places my card in the center of my palm, and squeezes my hand. He looks at me a little too long, a little too intensely. I pull away, but I smile over my shoulder as we head into post.
“What the fuck, Heaven?” I growl at her.

“What? Your mom is his boss. I don’t know why you couldn’t ask, anyway.”

“Because it doesn’t work that way.”

“Anyway, he was totally crushing on you,” Carrie says.

“On me?” Heaven asks.

“As if!” Carrie said.

“Perfect Cat,” Heaven says. “What a waste! If a hot GI gave me a look like that, I’d totally jump him!”

I humpf at her. Carrie starts singing “Oh Canada” at the top of her lungs. I put my arm around her shoulder and join in. Fuck Heaven. I don’t take advantage of my mom’s position. And I don’t date GIs. To be honest, I don’t even get it. If you were a civilian, and all you ever knew of soldiers was Richard Gere swooping up Debra Winger in An Officer and A Gentleman, then maybe a uniform could be sexy. But seriously, BDUs are literally dad-uniforms around here.

I mean, yes, his eyes were amazingly blue. And yes, he looked at me like he was looking into my soul. And yes, he seemed to totally get that I was saying sorry for my idiot friends. He is still wearing the same combat boots that Mom and Dad wear every day. It’s just weird. Gross. Whatever.

Still, I feel like we should do something for him, like say thank you for not making it weird or worse or whatever. So, when we’re done eating, I buy a pack of fries. And a Mountain Dew. He looks like a guy who drinks Mountain Dew.

“I think you lii-ii-ke him,” Heaven says.
“Whatever,” I say. “You got me into this mess. I’d make you buy him apology fries but then you probably would try to jump him behind the MP shack and it would be my fault that you missed remedial math.”

Carrie laughs so hard she snorts Coke out of her nose.

As we approach the gate, I can see blue eyes around the corner, leaning against the side of the building. I also see the glow of his cigarette between his fingers. Honestly, that helps. The taste of nicotine when you kiss someone is about as gross in reality as the uniform is a turn-off in theory.

My friends head out. I walk around the building toward him. Heaven hovers by the fence, alone. I hold out the BK fries and cup.

“To say sorry for whatever that was.”

“Not necessary,” he says.

But he reaches for my peace offering. He drops his cigarette and stubs it out. We stand there, in silence. I shrug.

“I should get back.”

“Can you stay a few more minutes?”

I check my watch. 15 minutes until the bell.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Cool.”

I notice a bottle of Mountain Dew on the road behind him. Up against the wall. I was right.

“So, where you from?” I ask.

“Nebraska.”

“Cool. My mom grew up there.”

“Cool.”
He is quiet again. I can hear Heaven breathing. I look over my shoulder and see her hovering on the fence, still inside the gate. I look at her. She shrugs. I turn back to him.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

I hate this question. What do people want to know? Where was I born? Where I lived the longest? Where I live now? What difference does it even make?

“Who knows,” I say.

“You don’t know where you’re from?”

“I’m from nowhere.”

His brow furrows. And then he gets it. He gets me.

“Oh!” he says. “Military life, right! What’s it like, living in so many places? How old were you the first time you flew on an airplane?”

“Six weeks.”

“Six weeks old?”

“Yup.”

“Crazy,” he says.

I don’t think it’s crazy. It’s just life. I think it’s crazy that some people live their whole lives in the same bedroom. That’s what’s fucking crazy. I don’t say anything.

“So, like, have you lived in lots of places, like lots of countries and stuff?” he asks.

“This is my third tour overseas.”

“Crazy,” he says.

He says crazy a lot. Like he’s twelve, except he’s in charge of national security. That’s what’s crazy, if you ask me. I look at my watch. I look at him. He is really, really cute. Young. Like, he could be a senior and take me to prom this year, young. Football player, maybe. His
shoulders are really broad. And I know I’ve already said this, but his eyes are so, so blue. *Top Gun* Iceman blue. Probably just as dangerous.

Travis has blue eyes. They’re just normal blue eye blue. Shit, Travis. I remember Travis.

I remember this guy, whoever he is, is a GI.

I remember I am going to be late for class.

He steps up close, leans down into my face. People only stand this close when they are about to kiss. I feel oddly comfortable and afraid at the same time.

“Could I get your number?” he whispers.

His voice is deep and husky. I feel it in the pit of my stomach.

I pause. I look at my watch. I have two minutes until the bell. I shake my head and start walking away from him, back toward the school, fast.

He takes a couple big steps. He is striding beside me. His arm brushes mine.

“Why not?”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it serious?”

“I’m only 15.”

I pause. I look at him, again. I shrug, realizing I am pretty indifferent about Travis, but that’s okay.

“It’s not supposed to be serious,” I say.

“How old is he?”

“He’s 16.”
I am 15. I have a boyfriend named Travis. I have a rule about GIs. This guy is a GI. A GI who works for my mom. The bell rings in the distance.

“And now I’m late for class. Awesome.”

“At least tell me your name?” he says.

I stop. I look at him, again.

“I’m Catherine.”

I look back, and see Heaven still standing along the fence.

“You can call me Cat.”

I know what Heaven is doing. This is not the first time. I get hit on, and I say no. Or I have a boyfriend, and then we break up. She swoops in like a Zamboni. Or a catfish. She likes to clean up after me. I may as well help her. I point at her.

“That’s my friend, Heaven,” I say.

He looks toward the gate. He looks back toward me.

“I’m John, he says. “See you again, Cat.”

I wave Heaven over and start running toward the school. My feet pound the pavement. My heart pounds even louder. My cheeks feel hot. I don’t know if it’s the stress of being late, the rush of running, or the flush of whatever it is I just felt for a guy I can’t, won’t, shouldn’t feel anything for. It doesn’t matter if I like him. It doesn’t matter if he likes me. And it really doesn’t matter, anyway, because Heaven will close the deal. A teen girl in a black lace top who is willing to have sex isn’t something guys turn down.
The air was thick and stale. Decades of smoke combined with the lit cigarettes in the room created a hazy fog around the table. Tammy sat along the side of the long boardroom table, near the door, her government issue memo pad and plain pen stamped property of the US Army on the table in front of her.

Tammy took notes in every meeting, and kept her pen and pad always ready in her pants-leg cargo pocket. She filled at least one memo pad a week. In a locked drawer of her desk, completed notebooks were bound by rubber band and organized by month and then year. As she worked, in her own messy shorthand, she starred important information and circled action items, later x’ing them out to indicate completion. Mostly, she took notes to stay focused, to stay on top of things, to stay in control. She’d learned through the years that her notetaking also offered an additional benefit: it forced others to behave better. The men with whom she worked were often suspicious of her notebooks, of what she was writing, of what, in particular, she was writing about them. They were a little less coarse, a little less rude, a little less blatantly offensive when she had her pen and pad in plain sight.

Not that it was making a difference in the current meeting. The topic at hand was all potential logistical issues related to the ongoing deployment of soldiers and units from Heidelberg to the Middle East. Much of the base was cleaned out, and more were going, stripping the Garrison down to essential workers and family support teams only, as everyone else headed to the desert, to Southwest Asia, SWA. The boardroom table seated a few Generals from Heidelberg and other USAREUR posts, and several Heidelberg Colonels, heads of various units and departments. Tammy was the only female voice. Of particular concern was the roughly twelve percent of
soldiers, like Tammy, who happened to be female. Specifically, the ways in which those female soldiers might inconvenience the deployment.

The head of the medical company was irritated when Tammy brought up sanitary products.

“Seriously?” he sneered. “Women’s products? I suppose you expect my medics to carry them.”

Tammy unholstered her gun. She placed it on the table. She took off her belt and opened her small ammunition pouch.

“Look, boys,” she said, “I’ve replaced half of my bullets with tampons. And that’s fine, for me, I can restock in my office and in my vehicle, and it’s unlikely I’ll go through all my ammo, even in a warzone like this. But don’t we want the young women who are actually headed to a combat zone to have all of their ammunition?”

Tammy closed her pouch, put her belt back on, and reholstered her weapon. The room was silent for a moment. These men didn’t even pick up sanitary products for their wives and daughters at the commissary. For all their bluster, they could be squeamish.

“Maybe they could put them in their cover,” one Colonel suggested.

The table around him nodded. Tammy burst out laughing.

“You want soldiers to wear sanitary pads in their hats?”

“Yes,” he responded. “It’s a good use of existing space.”

Tammy bent down to her briefcase and dug. She found a quarter. She got up, left the room, and walked the three flights of stairs to the only women’s restroom in the building. She bought a bulky sanitary pad from the ancient vending machine. On her way back to the board room, she stopped in the coat room and grabbed her cover. She entered the room with her cover on, which was against regulation, and the sanitary napkin obviously pushing up through the top of her hat.
“Seriously, gentleman, this is what you want?” she snorted as she entered.

They stopped. They looked at her. She pulled the hat off her head and displayed the pad.

“This is a single pad. A period lasts four to seven days. You go through four to seven pads a day. Are you going to give these women bigger hats?”

The head of the medical command put up his hand.

“We’re moving on, Tammy. Soldiers need to be responsible for their own gear. This is not something we will be dealing with further.”

Tammy shook her head.

“This is bullshit,” she said. “When you start making your male privates haul months’ worth of toilet paper as their own gear, then I’ll agree with you. These aren’t girls on the way to a party. These are soldiers. Who we are sending in to support a combat zone. You are failing them by failing to provide the supplies they need.”

Tammy turned to the only other female in the room, a General’s secretary, taking notes on a stenographer’s pad.

“Make sure you note my objection to this monkey court decision,” Tammy said.

Tammy sat back down.

“Moving on,” another Colonel said. “What about sex?”

“Oh, Jesus,” Tammy said, not under her breath.

“Well, you know, technically it’s in violation of the UCMJ,” said the head of JAG, the Army corps of lawyers. “But, you know, if the kids are over there a long time, we need to leave some room for fun. As long as it’s consensual fun.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that. What is a worry is if one of those girls gets pregnant,” one Colonel responded.
“We don’t need to worry about consensual sex?” Tammy asked.

As often as she had dealt with sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, it still shocked her. She looked around the room, at the men nodding at her, as if there really was no problem.

“Our girls want sex just as much as our boys do,” said one Colonel.

“Okay, first of all,” Tammy said, “even if some of our young female soldiers do want to have sex, it’s inherently a problem that there is only one young female soldier for every nine male soldiers. Every single young male Joe she’s not screwing is going to treat her like shit. Second of all, unless we are talking about sex between two young equal age, equal rank soldiers, it is never consensual. Never. If a young female soldier is willingly sleeping with a Sergeant, she either thinks she has to, or she thinks she’ll get promoted faster. Either one of those is a problem that’s going to end up an IG complaint, either by her or another young female soldier who thinks she should have been the one to get promoted. And if that young female soldier is sleeping with an officer, then you bet your ass she either knows she has to, or she wants to trade in her uniform and become an Army wife – and both of those issues are going to end up at IG too. And I’m not even talking about actual rape, since the General told me he doesn’t want to hear any more from me on that issue.”

Sometimes, when Tammy got mad, she couldn’t stop talking. Her concerns were real. That didn’t make it any easier to get her point across, or to make the other officers care.

“Okay, Tammy,” the General interrupted, “you’ve had a lot to say today. I think we’ve spent enough time hashing out the problems of ten percent of our force. Let’s get back to the real issues that might affect the 90% of our soldiers who will actually be fighting in combat.”

Tammy’s cheeks were hot with anger. Her pulse throbbed in her throat. She’d been put in her place, yet again. Women’s issues were not soldier’s issues, even for women’s soldiers. They wanted her to sit in the corner, like the stenographer, and shut up. Just take notes and be present
so they could say a female Colonel had been part of the decisions. Being in the room wasn’t the same as being part of the meeting. Having your say didn’t mean anything, if nobody listened. She’d been fighting for more than twenty years, and with every further act of integration, with every increase in the numbers of women in the forces, with every one of her own promotions, she had hoped that she would actually be able to make a difference. But there she sat, with her new Eagles on her shoulders, just like all the other Colonels in the room, and it still didn’t make a God-damned difference. Her voice still wasn’t heard. Her opinion still didn’t matter. She was still not really an officer, but just a Woman Officer. Her heart broke as she thought about all those young female soldiers, packing their gear and preparing for deployment and what might be in store for them when they arrived in the desert. She hoped their fellow soldiers would treat those young women better than their commanding officers, and she hoped that the young male soldiers would be more respectful to their female colleagues then her peers were to her.
A wall of blackberry brambles looms over the path by the park. I like to visit with a stainless-steel bowl, like I do with Grandma. For every plump, fragrant berry I put in the bowl for later, I eat one. I pause for a moment, and look across the fields. The bumble bees buzz behind me. The scents of onions and strawberries and asparagus mix like a fancy salad at a cocktail party. The morning sun is unseasonably warm for fall. It strikes me, suddenly, how much small-town farm country looks the same, no matter what country you’re in. With the sun, the berries, the open fields, and the fragrant scent of green, I could be with Grandma in Nebraska, and she’d be making blackberry pie for dinner. Whether you call them zwiebel or onions, whether you drive along country roads in your car to reach the city of Heidelberg or the city of Omaha, fields always have a musty, pungent scent.

Farm country is farm country no matter what language the farmers speak, but bases are different. Back in the states, Army bases are self-contained units. I was born on Fort Bragg, which is a nation on its own. Notice I said I was born on Fort Bragg. You live on Fort Bragg. Like living on an island. Or the moon.

Here, we don’t live on anything. My parents are stationed at United States Army Europe Headquarters, at Garrison Heidelberg, in Heidelberg, Germany. We live in a rented house in a small German farm town, one of a collection of towns that host houses that are approved for rental to American Military Personnel and their families. Five days a week September through May, school buses with US license plates run morning and evening through these rural German backroads to shuttle American kids to American schools.

I walk home through the quiet streets. A few older women are out, aprons over their dresses just like Grandma wears, scrubbing their sidewalks sparkling clean with brooms and buckets of
water. On a massive concrete wall, the spray-painted graffiti in angry four-foot-high letters is so new it’s still dripping, GO HOME AMERICANS. So much has changed since we’ve been in Germany. We were here as the Berlin wall fell, and the borders opened up. First it meant more places to travel. Then it meant refugee camps on the edges of town. Now, as war brews in the gulf, the pot bubbles with simmering anger toward Americans. It’s ironic that they tell us they hate us in English instead of German.

I unlock the door. I try to be quiet inside the silence. My mom is sleeping off another night shift. My dad is out prepping for his football game. Right now, his “preparations” probably mean he’s hanging at the bar outside the Spórtplatz, starting his day with bier. Breakfast of champions.

Here’s what you need to know about my dad’s complicated relationship with football. He was middling varsity player at his mid-sized high school, mostly a second-string bench warmer. He made the practice team in college, but was never invited to suit up for a game. If he’d had a boy, I’m sure they would have thrown the pigskin around on weekends, but I was left to my own devices to figure out how to throw a spiral to earn an A in middle school PE. He loves the game, but football has never loved him. When we got to Germany, a few German men, rebelling against their football traditions, were building a competitive network of American Football teams. Over biers and bullshit, Dad talked his way into a head coach slot for one of the emerging teams. Finally, in the land of soccer, football loves Dad as much as he loves football.

In the kitchen, I put a handful of blackberries in a colander. I stick the rest in the fridge. I put berries in a cereal bowl, then cover them with cornflakes and milk. The crunch of cornflakes is shockingly loud when you eat alone in the still of morning.

The shrill bring of the phone jars me. I rush to answer before the second ring.

“Balzac residence, how may I help you?”
I have impeccable telephone manners. You have to as an Army brat. You never know who could be calling. Even though we are in Germany, phone calls that come in are always Americans, or Germans who know that they are calling Americans. I don’t have to worry about German on the phone.

One of my friends is gathering a gaggle to head to the pool. I don’t feel like it. I miss middle school, when trips to swimming pools with friends were all about water slides, wave pools, and fantastic, crazy games of 5-team chicken. We are sophomores. We are grown up and we have to be cool. Sexy. It’s boring as hell. My friends will spend more time fluffing their hair then swimming. I tell her my dad’s gone and my mom’s asleep, and I’m not sure when she’ll get up to ask. My friends don’t suggest I go without permission, like they would for anyone else. They’ve all been on the receiving end of my mom’s anger. If you sleep over at my place, you have to bus your dishes to the sink and act like a civilized house guest, because my mom doesn’t have a problem with chewing out someone else’s kid.

Popularity is fragile. If you tell your friends no, they get mad and stop inviting you. Or call you a geek. Everybody understands that parents are assholes who never let you do anything. On an Army base, common punishments include hundreds of nose-to-the-floor push-ups, a dose of Tabasco sauce to the tongue, smacks across the face, or even belts across the back. Nobody questions why or if you are afraid of your parents. We are all afraid of our parents. And everyone is afraid of my mom.

When my mom wakes up, she seems pleasantly surprised to find me home. We make ice cream sundaes with the fresh blueberries and some chocolate syrup, and watch *The Love Boat* on Sky TV. I look at the clock. When I see it’s 1800 hours, 6 pm, I ask my mom if we can go see my dad’s football game. She is rested and restored from a nap, some ice cream, and some time with
me, so she agrees. She loves my dad, but she does not have a complicated relationship with football. She has a clear hatred for football and it’s faux-war-gaming.

A half-hour later, I am squinting through the windshield into the glare of the setting sun. The gravel crunches under my mom’s tires as we pull to a stop on the edge of the parking lot. As I get out of the car, the wind catches my door and slams it shut.

Across the parking lot, pacing on the edge of the grassy field, my father stops in his tracks. His gaze jerks in our direction. The brim of his Rhine Neckar Renegades hat is pulled low over his eyebrows. I can see the glint of the lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. My father has been pretending he doesn’t smoke, pretty much since I was born. There are often cigarette butts in his BDU pants pocket. He always claims he was cleaning up the post. This is a ridiculous claim, the grown-up equivalent of my dog ate my homework, because Lieutenant Colonels don’t pull duty for litter clean-up.

My dad doesn’t like to be confronted with his own lies.

For Dad, anger is a physical thing. It isn’t an emotion; it is an embodiment. He doesn’t get angry or sound angry or act angry. He doesn’t feel angry. He becomes anger itself. Like Lou Ferrigno ripping through his shirt as he transforms from Bruce Banner into Hulk, my father’s body, his presence, his entire being inflates and becomes rage.

I feel the back of my neck tighten. My shoulders clench with dread. I walk slowly, dragging my peach Keds through the dirty gravel. This was supposed to be a wonderful surprise.

We approach the side of the field.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” my dad snarls.

A cluster of twenty-something German cheerleaders with big hair and satiny skirts giggle. I sigh. I have been a supportive daughter. Seriously, you have no idea. I have spent months coming
to dad’s practices, trying to help the cheerleaders. I have brought them cheer costume catalogues. I have taught them cheers and jumps. They don’t want to be cheerleaders. They want to be strippers. They aspire to slink like background dancers on MTV. They also clearly aspire to my father, which is so gross considering that they are not that much older than me, and he could be their father. I would bet you my allowance that even though the football team doesn’t have any points on the scoreboard, these cheerleaders are racking up a significant score with my dad.

Mom looks at Dad. She is wearing her wilting gaze. It’s the same gaze all mothers use to make their children squirm, with 1000 times more power. She puts a hand on my shoulder, does a precise about face, and pulls me back to the car in silence. Dad’s anger is fire, but Mom’s anger could extinguish a volcano. Her anger is cold, precise, and painful. It’s the liquid nitrogen that the dermatologist at the post clinic uses to kill plantar warts.

I climb back into the car. My mom starts it. She backs up. Dad is suddenly directly behind the vehicle, so close he places his palm on the glass of the hatch-back door. So close Mom could have run over his feet. Mom looks back at him and makes eye contact like crackling ice. She slides the gear shift into drive and pulls out of the lot. He runs behind us to the edge of the parking lot. I watch him in the rear-view window, standing in a halo of gravelly dust as we drive home without him.
Tammy sucked air every time her feet hit the concrete. Left, right, left, right, left, right. Breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe. Every time her heel hit the ground, she felt spikes up to her hips. It wasn’t as bad as a few years back, when they were still running in combat boots, the thin sheet of leather flapping on the road with every step. She’d had tumors chiseled out since then, both shins, tops of both feet, everywhere the laces had rubbed. Right leg, left leg, right foot, left foot, an Army doc with a hammer and a chisel. She had been conscious, alert and hearing, the anesthesiologist knocked the pain but kept her awake, a construction zone pounding through the years of wear and tear and bone spurs up and down her bones.

Most of her unit was ahead of her, she could see them barely in the dim pre-sunrise haze. Everyone’s short yellow shorts glowed neon, but the grey issue Army shirts faded into the dark. A few stragglers and walkers paced behind her. Her medical profile, the document from the doctor allowing her to walk during her post-surgical recovery, had expired. Now, she had to run. So, she ran. Excruciating step after step she ran. Spike through the left foot, spike through the right, spike through the left shin, spike through the right.

“Breathe,” she gritted out loud to herself, through her teeth.

At the Army hospital in Stuttgart, a psychiatrist had spent some time during her physical therapy briefing her how to use self-hypnosis. She reminded herself: pain was all in her head. She didn’t have to feel it. She didn’t really feel it. The tumors and spurs were gone. She was in running shoes, there were no leather laces rubbing her shins raw. There was no pain in her foot. There was no pain in her leg. She didn’t need to feel the pain. Count the steps. Count the steps. Count the steps.

“Your left, your left, your left, right, left,” she whispered softly to herself.
She was counting out the cadence ingrained since boot camp day one. Her voice switched from her old drill instructor’s sharp Southern drawl to the psychiatrists soft, dreamy whisper.

“Counting down from 100. You don’t feel any pain. You are in control. 100. 99. 98. 97 …”

Before, Tom would have run with her every day on her practice runs. Tom was a good runner, a good running coach. She could have really used his help, her first run test back after recovery. She knew he wasn’t really too busy. His ops-tempo hadn’t ramped up, like hers had. He still ran every day. They could have run together. If he’d wanted to. If he hadn’t found excuse after excuse.

She was at the one-mile mark. She twisted her left wrist, checking the time. Eleven minutes. She was pacing exactly to finish at 22 minutes. She’d pass with about a minute and a half to spare. Some of her soldiers should already be close to the finish line. They’d get their PT badges for maxing out all three events, and make her look good. She’d been practicing pacing it out at 11 minutes per mile, giving herself a little space to breathe through the pain, with a 90-second buffer in case she had to walk through a cramp.

Tammy knew, every day, that she had to be better as a soldier, in order to just be good enough. She practiced after hours at the range, to shoot better. She spent weeks practicing with her piece, and she could break it down and reassemble it faster than anyone on the stopwatch. She studied regulation books at night; she could quote chapter and verse on any potential issue. Her boots were always polished. Her creases were always pressed. Her hair bun was always perfect and discreet. She carried her 40-pound ruck on her 135-pound frame for 12 miles without complaint. Even her daughter was better behaved than any other officer’s child. For PT, for the runs, she had to accept just not failing.
She worried if any of her soldiers were in the struggling, straggling group behind her. Everyone who worked for her was younger, and male. Their times were tighter to max and to finish. She could pass at 22 minutes, but if they paced behind her, came in after her finish, they would fail.

If her soldiers failed, she failed.

She couldn’t fail.

She turned around. She walked backward, keeping her pace.

“Pick it up, soldiers,” she barked. “Unless you’re on profile, you need to light a fire under your ass, you hear me?”

She turned around, returned to her slow but steady run. Left foot, right foot, left leg, right leg, pain, fuck it, pain, fuck it, pain.

She refused to feel it. The pain was not real.

Breathe. Start counting again. 100. 99. 98. 97. Keep breathing. Push through this.

“On your right, ma’am,” one by one they announced and passed.

“Hooah,” she responded to each. “Steady on.”

“You good, ma’am?” the last asked, as he passed.

“I’m good, soldier,” she answered. “Move out.”

She’d been training for six months after nine months of profiles. Crutches and canes and re-learning how to walk. She’d been clocking herself on every run for months to prep for this, her first Army Physical Fitness Test back after surgery.

If she failed, it would be a shitstorm. She was already the bitch female who came to post as a Lieutenant Colonel slotted into a Colonel’s position, an affront to every other male Colonel on post. Every male Colonel who deserved the job and was pissed at the damn gender affirmative
action. If she failed, she would also be a pussy bitch who couldn’t even pass a damn easy run with the joker women’s times.

She felt a hand on her arm. She kept her head forward, looked out of the corner of her eye to her left. She smiled. It was her driver, Sergeant Miller, running beside her.

“You done?” she asked.

“All done. Let’s get you in, ma’am. Keep breathing and stay with me.”

Worry creeped in. She started to twist her wrist, looking toward her watch.

He reached out and gently put a hand on her arm.

“No ma’am. You don’t need to look. I got you paced. Just stay with me. You will make it.”
I sit in the cold dark of morning, my satin comforter smooth, soft, and warm against my bare arms, the nubby sofa rough against my bare legs and feet. I pull my knees in toward my chest and lean my head on the couch back. It’s before sunrise and the sky is dark and clear out the window, stars flickering in the distance above the fallow onion fields I know are there but can’t see.

“… You’re to blame, you give loo-o-ve a bad name.”

Bon Jovi wails, my radio alarm clock blinking from across the room, announcing my usual 0600 wake-up. He interrupts the angry whispers I’ve been straining to hear for the last hour.

I leap up, discarding my comforter on the heated tile floor as I cross the room in five leaps, to turn the alarm off. My alarm is loud. I know my mom will hear it downstairs. Unable to lie to themselves that I’m still asleep, my parents will now stop not-whispering, stop fighting, just stop.

I hear the door slam. The house shakes. He has left.

That is what he does. He rages. Then he leaves.

I don’t have the energy to talk about it, not even a well-intentioned temperature check about how I’m doing, or how much I’ve heard. I run across the room in the opposite direction, discarding my cotton shorts and t-shirt in a heap outside my bathroom door.

I can hear Mom’s boots clunking up the stairs to my room as I jump into the shower and turn the water on, hot, full blast, pounding into the top of my head. I love that in Germany there is a hot water heater directly above my shower, and I never have to wait for hot water.

My mom peeks around the door jamb.

“Hey, honey. You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say.
I don’t look so that I don’t have to make eye contact.

“Do you want to talk?”

“Nah,” I say.

“Catherine, honey, I’m sorry if we woke you up,” she says.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.”

She pauses. She steps through the doorway.

“Well,” she says, “I have to go. I made some hardboiled eggs last night and we have the Capri-Sun packs in the fridge so you can grab some breakfast for the bus. There’s a couple of brotchen left from the weekend in the paper bag on the counter, too.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Okay. Have a good day, honey. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I say as her head leaves my doorway.

I pour shampoo from the plastic orange bottle into my palm. The smell of apples fills the shower. I scrub my head trying to scrub out the sound of my parents fighting.

The door opens again.

“Don’t forget your lunch, honey. And don’t forget to start the washing machine and the dishwasher when you’re out of the shower.”

“I got it, Mom.”


The door latches behind her. I peek out at the clock.
It’s already 0620. Shit. I rinse fast, then turn off the shower and hop out. I grab a large, thick Turkish towel from the stack and wrap myself. The towel is actually Turkish, from a trip my dad took to Turkey when I was five, coming home with ten large thick bath towels as thick as blankets and as large as sheets. They don’t sell towels this big, this warm, this absorbent at the PX, so for the last ten years, every time an edge frays, my mother pulls out her sewing kit and patches the edge. I don’t know anyone else who patches bath towels. Except Grandma.

I grab the purple plastic bottle of Aussie non-aerosol from the counter by my sink, bend over, and spray my hair from scalp to tip, and then blow dry upside down. The smell of my grape hairspray fills the room, mixing with the apple from the shower. I have to unplug the hairdryer before plugging in the curling iron, because even if the hairdryer is off, having them both plugged into the same outlet will blow the circuit. I carefully work my hair, creating a high fringe that Tawny Kitaen could rock in a White Snake video. I want to curl up and go back to bed and hide from the stress of my parents’ perpetual fighting. But my look takes work, my reputation as cool instead of nerd is precarious, and I don’t get a day off from the game. Maybelline Great Lash, Max Factor X-Rated Gloss, and Body Shop Fuzzy Peach Perfume Oil on my neck, wrists, and ankles. Guess jeans, an Esprit t-shirt, and a Benetton cardigan. Scrunchy socks, Keds, two swatches. Dangling hoops in my first holes. I leave the same studs from yesterday in my third and fourth holes.

I hit the stairs running. Down on the first floor, I grab my breakfast and lunch bags and hit the button on the dishwasher. I grab my jacket and slide into it while slinging my leather backpack over my shoulder. I muscle the heavy front door open. I step out onto the thick wad that is the Stars and Strips. Dave must have been late delivering the papers, or my mom would have grabbed it on her way out. I wonder if he’ll make the bus. I remember that it’s a Tuesday and my weekly
current events paper is due today in English, so instead of throwing the paper in the house, I shove it into my backpack, still in its damp plastic wrapper.

I latch the door, and hit the sidewalk at a jog. The morning is cool and grey and damp. I am halfway down the first block when I remember I forgot to start the washing machine.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She’s going TDY tomorrow. Her uniforms are all in there, soap poured on top. She is nice, and doesn’t run it first thing in the morning, so that I have water pressure for my shower. And now, when we get home late, she’s going to have to stay up two hours later than usual while they wash and dry before she can pack. She’s going to be pissed.

If I turn around and run back to start the washer, I’ll miss the bus. If I miss the school bus, it’s a two-hour process of transfers between city buses and base shuttles before I make it to class, and I’ll miss all of first period. And she’ll be pissed.

I hit the corner just as the bus pulls up in front of the stop. We share the same bus stop as the Heidelberg regional area bus service. Our buses are the same grey-blue Mercedes buses that the city uses, except for the distinct USA license plates, and the cardboard printed sign with the school bus route number in the front window. The MP climbing down the steps of the stopped bus also makes it obvious this isn’t a regular regional bus.

I’m grateful, for once, for the newly added extra security. The individual bag checks make the line boarding the bus move slowly, so I can catch my breath and walk the remaining 200 yards to the back of the line.

PFC Smith is using his black tactical baton to quickly swipe through each backpack. We have to open up before we get to the front of the line to keep it moving. The bus picks us up thirty minutes earlier than it did last year, because of the extra time all the security procedures take.
We’ve gotten used to our lunches getting squished, it’s daily collateral damage. I am last in line.
Smith gives me the “Wassup” head nod with his super cute smile. He skips my bag with a wink, and flicks his head sideways to motion I should get on the bus.

He’s a cute guy. Totally a Brandon Walsh, not a Dylan, the kind of cute mommas like. He’s a nice guy. You can tell he went straight from his Eagle Scout uniform to this one. If he were six months younger and a senior, I would have flirted back when he first flirted with me. I would have let myself like him. But I don’t date Joes. I’m unusual. Most of my friends are like Heaven. Heaven threw herself on Smith like he was the last slice of pizza at lunch. He’s a nice guy, but even nice guys want to get laid. I’m pretty sure he and Heaven are doing it.

I climb the steps. Smith climbs up behind me. The driver pulls the lever to shut the doors. Smith holsters his tactical baton and pulls his M16 back down to the ready. The 45-minute drive to Mark Twain Village is long enough when we’re sitting in the comfy seats. I can’t imagine how long it feels for him, having to patrol up and down that tiny aisle the whole time.

“Wassup, Balzac,” Max says as I pass his seat. “You been thinking about my ball sack again, baby?”

“In your dreams, asshole.” I say.

I pause. For once, the perfect comeback comes on time. Usually, they come a few minutes too late and haunt me all day.

I smile as sweetly as I can.

“You’d have to grow a pair first.”

His friends cackle as I walk past.

Travis has saved me the window seat. I slide in past him, just as the bus lurches forward. He opens up his big, green, puffy Philadelphia Eagles jacket. I slide inside and lean against him.
He wraps his left arm around my waist, sliding his hand up inside my shirt, his palm cold on my bare stomach. He leans into my right ear and kisses my temple. Rules are pretty lax on the bus. The bus drivers are all German contractors who barely speak English, but there are some rules, so we keep it tame and avoid actually kissing on the bus. He smells my hair, which probably smells like fruit salad.

“Really like your peaches, wanna shake your tree,” he whispers.

I haven’t eaten any breakfast yet, but I’m sick to my stomach. Their voices are echoing across the front of my forehead. I feel the start of a migraine coming on. I reach down to my feet and dig through my backpack. I don’t have my pills from the neurologist.

“Fuck,” I say under my breath.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say.

I force a smile. I don’t want to get into it. He wouldn’t get it, anyway. His mom is the perfectly coiffed, perfectly manicured kind of blond you picture as a Colonel’s wife. She calls her husband Sir.

“Nothing,” I say. “I just have a headache. What you got in the Discman?”

“Bobby Brown. Rock Witch’a. I wanna rock with you!”

I remember my current events paper. I bend down and pull the newspaper out of my backpack. If I pick out the article now, I can quickly write my 3-paragraph summary, analysis, and personal connection during homeroom. At least 5 people are going to write about Iran and Iraq with a personal connection of their father’s deployments. A couple of murder headlines: we live under a cloud of death. I notice a small feature interest article about the museum on Ellis Island. I’m pretty sure some of my relatives would have come through Ellis Island, so I can write my
personal-connection paragraph about how immigrants built America and my personal place in the melting pot. I carefully rip out the article, pull out and un-Velcro my sticker-covered Trapper Keeper, and put the article inside the pocket of my English folder. My parents’ angry whispers pound along my forehead.

_I know it’s your fault. It has to be. You pulled some strings or talked to someone. Otherwise, they would have called me up. It’s your goddamn fault._

_Are you really that stupid? You are two years into a three-year joint slot with NATO. It would take a fucking Congressional sign-off to get you out of your job. They can’t call you up. And who, exactly, is going to call for you anyway? You didn’t leave the 82\(^{nd}\) on good terms after sleeping with your commander’s wife. Don’t blame me for your own fucking grave. If you’re so goddamn angry that you’re home with us, call your branch manager. See if you can even get him on the line._

_Well, then, it’s your fucking prayers. Stop praying for me. This is my destiny._

_Man. I really wish I had all the power you think I have. If only God listened to me that much, maybe my husband wouldn’t be such an asshole._

We pull up to the perimeter of Mark Twain Village and park inside the first ring of barricades. The barricades and barriers are set up around the school parking lot. PHV, where the middle school and the school sports grounds are, is fully fenced, but MTV is open, integrated into the surrounding German community, so they’ve built barriers with concrete blocks and tire spikes. A whole party of PFCs with Kevlar K-pots and loaded M16s take turns as bouncers at the disco. Their faces have all grown familiar over the months. A second one joins Smith on the bus with a dog. The dog sniffs our bags and feet, searching for explosives. A team of them swarm the outside of the bus with long metal sticks, mirrors on the end, looking underneath the bus. A couple more
walk a couple more dogs around the outside of the bus. The bus was checked the same way before
the driver and Smith left the motor pool this morning, but they’re checking again in case anything
was compromised in the 90 minutes it’s been in the peripheral towns picking up American high
schoolers. It will be checked again when it goes back to the motor pool this morning, again before
it leaves the motor pool for afternoon pick up, again by the MP’s when it arrives at the high school
before anyone can board, and again before it is parked at the motor pool tonight. And repeat again
tomorrow. And every day forward until we hear otherwise.

When I finished Freshman year in June, we got on and off buses, on and off post, with just
a flip of our ID cards. Now, our buses, our parents’ cars, our backpacks – everything is searched.
Every single time. The same barricades around the parking lot ring the school. The MP’s have a
second contingent patrolling the outside of the school, a third contingent patrolling inside the
hallways, and a fourth contingent of snipers standing watch on the corners of the roof.

Except for the snipers, they’re all kids, too. If they were a year younger, they’d be thinking
about dates for Homecoming and Oktoberfest and how fucking awesome it is to be a teenager in
Germany where you don’t have to sneak beer from your parent’s fridge to impress your date. Even
with the K-pots and the M16s and the dogs and the mirrors, some of them are still teenagers.
They’ll be taking dates to Oktoberfest and thinking about how fucking awesome it is to be working
in Germany where you don’t have to sneak beer from your parent’s fridge and a whole bunch of
16 and 17-year-old girls want to piss off their daddies by screwing a joe.

We finally have clearance and the bus pulls out of the first barricaded area, through the
narrow obstacle course, and stops in front of the school. We head straight in; they don’t do another
check at the school entrance. Travis grabs my hand as we walk through the door, and walks me to
my locker. He leans in behind my locker door and kisses me, and then walks off without a word.
I shove my books on the top shelf in my locker. I fold my jacket in carefully, touching the embroidered Balzac on the chest. I started begging my dad to give me the jacket after seeing Top Gun for the fifth time. It’s a flight crew jacket. Technically only for enlisted flight crew, so he can’t actually wear it. He had to stop wearing the jacket because he pissed off his boss. His boss found out my dad bent some rules to earn the flight crew status and that he wasn’t actually eligible or authorized to have the jacket in the first place. It was just going to waste in his closet. It’s way too cool to waste. Mom intervened. They fought that night, too. She told him that he either had to stop moping and let me wear it or she was going to throw the damn thing out. So, it’s mine, now.

Carrie’s already in Algebra II when I get there. I slide into the desk in the aisle next to her. We’re the only two sophomores in the class. Mr. Jackson has us near the front. Most of the sophomores are taking geometry, which we took last year. The class is a mix of college-aspiring juniors and community college aspiring seniors just trying to get their last math course for graduation.

“Hey, Care-Bear,” I whisper.

“Morning, Kitty-Cat,” she says. “You look cute today.”

“Thanks, girl,” I say. “You look beautiful, as always.”

Carrie is full-grown and flesched out, 5’10”, long legs. D-cup. Since her growing is over, her skin is totally clear. She looks like the glamazons on the cover of Teen and YM. Seniors who usually only look at Sophomores in dark alleys when drunk and trying to get some follow her like puppies in the school hallways. She doesn’t have to work at cool.

“Hey, if I need to, can I stay at your place for a few days? Or maybe you and Amy could come stay with me for a few days?”
Carrie and her family are Canadian. Her older sister finished her senior year at the American High School, but needs year thirteen to do college back in Canada. She’s working fulltime while she saves money to do a year of school in French in France, which will somehow count as her year thirteen.

“I’m sure that would be fine, either way, whichever you want.”

My mom heads out for 10 days of TDY tomorrow, inspections on other smaller posts or something. My dad isn’t scheduled to go anywhere. I know he wants to go to war, and as desperate as he is to get there, who knows when or how he’ll leave. He wouldn’t think twice about leaving me home alone to get his shot. He probably wouldn’t even think of me at all.

I’m writing numbers and working my way toward the solution, but my parents are still yelling in the back of my head.

*If you push your General on this, you’re ruining your future. You’re letting him down. Why are you doing this? Why is it so terrible for you to stay home with your wife and daughter?*

*I have to do my duty. I have to serve my country.*

*You ARE doing your duty. You ARE serving your country. Rear support is necessary. Our service back here matters, too.*

*No. It doesn’t.*

*So, what I’m doing doesn’t matter? I’m not serving MY country?*

*It’s fine for you. There is a war. Goddamn it. You can’t stop me.*

That was when I heard the crashing noise that I know was my father’s fist breaking through the wall. We’d made it two years in the same house without a hole in the wall. We’ll probably live with today’s hole until we move. The last time he put his fist through a wall, Dad was too lazy to repair it himself, and not around enough to call someone to fix it. Mom was too mad at him for
doing it to fix it. I got tired of looking at the damn hole in the wall so when I got *Tiger Beat* at B. Dalton at the mall a few months later, I taped a picture of Kirk Cameron over it. Right there in their Master Bedroom. I think I still have one new, unwrapped NKOTB poster from when Carrie and I took the train up to Frankfurt to catch the Magic Summer Tour. If there’s a new hole in the wall when I get home, Donny and crew are going up on the wall.

I shake my head to shake them out, to shake him off. I stare at the numbers on the page and figure out how to solve for X. I look up and see that Mr. Jackson has put a second problem set on the projector. I look around the room. Of the kids in this room, a third of them have dads who are now in a desert somewhere, doing who knows what. A few more have dads who are elsewhere in Germany, sleeping in barracks while they load trucks and pack airplanes. The rest are still here, running exercises and medical training and everything else they do to keep life running, working 16 hour shifts 6-and-a-half days a week since so many people are gone and everyone else has to fill the gap. Some of the moms work, like Carrie’s mom who is an RN taking extra shifts at the hospital to make up for the active-duty nurses who deployed in the first wave. Still, it’s a safe bet that I am the only person in this room who isn’t sure if they will have a parent home every night this week.

I can’t come up with a single example of another student in Heidelberg American High School who has a mom on active duty. There are plenty of asshole dads who punch walls and tell people what to do, they are, in fact, pretty much standard issue with the uniforms and the ID cards. I can think of a couple of women my parents work with – the German Doctor who works with my dad at NATO, but she’s German, and she doesn’t have kids. There is a young couple who live next door to us, but she’s a Captain and her kids are in preschool.
I write the solution to $x = $ and realize I have figured out something even cooler than a math solution. I remind myself to remember to tell my mom this tonight when we’re driving home. Maybe letting her know I know what a cool path-setting pioneer she is will take some of the heat off when she gets home and realizes I spazzed about the laundry this morning. Again. And I just know, with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, that one of these days, when we have a message from my dad from a guesthouse in Stuttgart, that the laundry is going to be the least of our worries.
Tammy hung up the phone as she pushed back her green vinyl chair and stood up from her metal desk, in one smooth, efficient swoop. She shrugged her shoulders up and down three times while slugging back the Styrofoam cup of luke-warm coffee. She felt a migraine building at the back of her head. She tapped the cargo pocket of her uniform pants, feeling the edge of her wallet and badge holder inside. She adjusted the holster on her waist. She grabbed her exterior jacket off the rack behind her as she headed toward the door.

Her aide knew the sound of her chair pushing back from his desk in the front room of her office suite. His job was to move as fast as she did. He was standing at the ready outside her door as she burst through.

“You need your jeep, ma’am?” he asked, his finger already pressing the button on his walkie-talkie.

“Yes,” she said, talking in a fast staccato as she marched toward the exit, the young man barely keeping up. “Send two teams right behind us to the tracks near the Sport Platz. A German national called it in. Polizei already on site. Jurisdiction currently unknown.”

Tammy pushed the door open with her left hand, pulling her cover down low over her brow with her right. Several young soldiers, slumping against the side of the old brick building, lit cigarettes dangling, dropped their cigarettes to the pavement and popped to attention, their hands promptly raised to salute.

“Ma’am,” they chorused.

She brought the sharp edge of her right hand across her eyebrow, with a barely perceptible nod.

“Afternoon, soldiers,” she said. “At ease.”
As she walked around the edge of the building toward the Military Police parking lot in the back, her jeep already running with her driver standing at attention at her open door, she noticed a younger woman. A young female officer, twenty-something, was giggling and swinging her briefcase as she walked down the sidewalk past the MP parking lot, coming from the Officer’s Club dining facilities.

Tammy stopped.

“Lieutenant,” she said, her voice cold, “I have already told you that while I appreciate bangs like that on my daughter and her friends, they are not within regulation. Fix your cover.”

The young woman paused, cocked her head to the side, and offered a half-smile.

“Lieutenant, fix your hat now.”

Tammy started walking again, as fast as she had stopped.

The young woman grimaced and slid her hat down onto her forehead, over the puff of her hair-sprayed bangs.

Tammy slid into the open door of the jeep. Her driver, trained to follow her efficiency, shut the door, slid in the front seat, shifted into gear and sped across post, through the gate, and towards the sport and walking complex near Heidelberg American High School.

As they drove, Tammy tuned her radio to the Polizei frequency, picking up what she could of the German-language static coming over the radio. As they drove past the high school, she checked her watch. It was almost 1400 hours. Catherine would still be in class. It was a Tuesday, so Catherine had cheer practice after school.

Tammy took a deep inhalation. Then she slowly exhaled, taking a moment to steady herself before whatever she faced at the tracks.
She hoped she would be done by 1700 hours, so she’d be able to pick Catherine up from the school before it started to get dark.

Catherine always waited patiently on the front steps of the school, completing her geometry and history homework, and never once complaining, even when she had to wait into the dark. Catherine never huffed at her, like Miss Lieutenant with the Bangs.

Tammy shrugged. She didn’t blame the lieutenant. Not exactly. Being pretty in an all-male Army gave young, female officers two options. They could work twice as hard and get half the credit. Or they could do nothing and get by with a flirty smile.

As long as they had a male boss.

Which they always did.

Tammy had been on active duty almost 23 years, and she had never worked for another woman.

Tammy was proud that she’d made the hard choice. She had plenty of friends back in officer basic who took the lieutenant’s path. None of them were still active duty. The few that had tried to stay on in the reserves had washed out there, too, after motherhood. Tammy sometimes felt like the last one standing. All of her friends were now officer’s wives, instead of officers.

Of course, she, too, was technically an officer’s wife.

Tammy laughed out loud.

“Everything okay, ma’am?” asked her driver, making eye contact through the rear-view mirror.

“Yeah, thanks Miller, I’m good.”

The jeep pulled up to a stop along the curve of the road. The Polizei already had their barriers and tape up, and Tammy could see her two teams pulling up in their jeeps behind her. The
sun was glaring against the glint of the tracks and the stopped train. She pulled her sunglasses on and her cover down tighter, as she stepped out of the vehicle. One of the Polizei, a chief she knew from prior joint cases, began walking toward her.

She’d made out over the radio that a walker had stepped in front of the train. The conductor had not been able to stop. Polizei had used a city bus to transport all of the passengers to the downtown train station. Several German officers were patrolling the area with dogs, looking for clues and body parts.

The train conductor leaned against the side of one of the Polizeis’ Mercedes, puffing from his glowing cigarette. Tammy hoped he spoke English, so she could get a clearer understanding of what happened. Most professionals spoke English, which helped her get by with passable German.

“American or German?” she asked the chief.

“We think American,” he answered with his thick, deep voice. “We find a shoe which is the Ked.”

“Ich habe Zähne gefunden,” one of the Polizei called out.

Tammy looked at the chief, an eyebrow raised.

“Ahh … he find … ahh … the dental … the teeth.”

“Got it, thanks. Danke,” she said.

“Hey, Jones,” she hollered at one of her guys, “They’re thinking American and they found teeth – I’m going to need them ID’d. Take them to the dental clinic yourself. Tell them I need it done yesterday. If you get push-back about how busy they are, you can radio me with their Colonel.”

“On it, ma’am,” Jones said.
Tammy continued walking with the Polizei chief, scanning the grass in rhythmic patterns. In the distance, off from the tracks, she saw a slight glint of metal and for a second, in the sunlight, a sparkle. Like a tracking dog, she kept the glint in her sights as she headed toward it purposefully.

“Can I see the shoe?” she said to the Polizei.

He hollered to one of his men, who came running with an evidence bag. Inside, there was a single faded black Ked.

She knelt down in the grass. One of her MPs, a Lieutenant, was instantly at her side, an empty evidence bag in his outstretched hand.

She grabbed the bag and expertly picked up a small engagement ring, and the few blades of grass that were touching the ring. She sealed the bag as she stood up.

She held the bag, and grabbed the Ked bag in her other hand.

“Danke,” she said, nodding at the German assistant.

The German chief, German assistant, and her own Lieutenant stood in silence. Her eyes narrowed as she looked back and forth between the two bags, her forehead furrowed in thought.

She turned toward her Lieutenant.

“Go to the high school. Tell the principal to clear the rest of his day. You and him, personally, go through every class roster. I want to know every girl truant this afternoon. Take him and that list with you to meet Jones at the dental clinic. Have them start with those records. Speak to no one else. No one knows anything until I break the news to this girls’ parents. Clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the Lieutenant said. “I’ll radio in with updates.”

Tammy headed toward her vehicle. Her driver, noticing her approach, crossed the field in large steps. He was at her side in moments.
“Miller,” she said, “Call my husband. Do not talk to his secretary. I don’t care if he’s with the General, have them pull him out and speak directly to him. Tell him to pick up Catherine from cheer practice at 1630.”

Tammy paused. She thought through the logistics, all the ways her husband could fuck this up and her daughter could find something out before Tammy was ready to break the news herself.

“Tell him to be there by 1620, and usher her straight into his vehicle. Tell him to keep her away from her friends and away from her phone. If he gives you some bullshit boondoggle excuse, tell him this is an order related to an ongoing investigation, remind him that I now outrank him, that I will not hesitate to write him up for insubordination, or worse call his daddy, and that he will not fuck this up.”

Miller suppressed a smile.

Then worry overtook his face. He leaned in toward his boss.

“You think it’s one of her friends, ma’am?” he whispered.

Tammy nodded, her mouth tight.

“The way the Keds are laced,” she said quietly. “They’re not tied in a bow. They’re cut short and knotted to make slip-ons. Catherine taught all her friends how to do that last year. If it is one of her friends, I want to tell her myself.”

“I’ll make sure the other Colonel Balzac understands, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Tammy headed back toward the track, continuing her scan for clues. Over her shoulder, she hollered back, “after you’re done with my husband, you and the guys call your wives. Let them know you won’t be home for dinner.”
Heaven’s locker is next to mine. Was next to mine. Every day, when I get out my science book or touch up my lip-gloss, I stare at the face of death. Sometimes, I just stand there, my palm on the cool metal that is, was, her locker. I think about how I failed. How I let her down. How I should have known something was wrong. Should have made her feel better about talking to me. How could I have spent so much time protecting her from herself and still failed?

For a month, there was police tape sealing her locker. Then, when it was done and it was clear she’d committed suicide, my mom in her official duty as Provost Martial and the school principal decided I should clean out her locker.

I was voluntold for duty. Voluntold is one of my favorite Army words. Most of my life is voluntold. I didn’t sign up for this shit. But here I am.

I sit in the hallway late one afternoon, after cheer practice, with boxes labeled school property, family property, and other. The principal wasn’t really clear about what I am supposed to put in the other box, but I know. It’s the stuff of Heaven’s that would cause her parents’ pain.

I start with the makeup. I realize that except for a can of travel hairspray Heaven swiped from the Shoppette, I bought every single item of makeup and perfume in Heaven’s locker. Two-and-a-half years of birthdays, Christmas, and just because. There is clear sticky Max Factor X-rated lip gloss in a tube, and small glass jars of fruit-scented lip gloss from the Body Shop, that I bought for her because she coveted mine. There is Eternity for Men, which I bought her for Christmas, because she insisted she liked how the men’s version smelled better than the woman’s version. Tiny glass bottles of orange and coconut Body Shop perfume oil. A pink tube of Maybelline Great Lash. A small brown Cover Girl pressed powder compact, so worn down that the puff had no fuzz left and the metal bottom was showing inside the case. If I’d realized she had
worn it down so much, I probably would’ve gotten her a new one. There are scrunchie hair elastics in blue, yellow, black, and green. I put all the makeup in the “other box,” just like I will put the locker shelves I gave Heaven, and I figure that one of these days I will visit the middle school and give them to Heaven’s little sister. I worry about her, too. She wears too much make-up and likes older boys, too. I wish I could say I will protect her from herself, but my track record is not looking good.

I read through the notes from John the GI boyfriend. Dozens of them, on the backs of receipts, on index cards, and on scraps of paper torn from a dot-matrix printer. Probably from the printer in the guard shack at the entrance to post, where they printed visitor passes and visitor parking tags. His handwriting is messy and his notes are utilitarian. “8 at the movies? The Dollar theater?” or “I get off at 1700, can we grab a slice?” Nothing he writes says love. I wonder how much that mattered to Heaven.

There is an envelope filled with dried flower petals, and a small gold-plated heart on a tarnished chain. The kind of necklace they sell on the rack at the PX near the jewelry counter, the jewelry you don’t have to wait for someone to unlock a case.

There are notes from Heaven to John. I read them, too. Later, I will wish that I hadn’t, because I can’t stop seeing them. Heaven is a ghost in purple ink on scrap paper, writing across the inside of my eyelids. Heaven N John 4Eva. Over and over and over.

I can’t figure out why Heaven had her own notes to John, frilly handwriting and little hearts. Who has their own love notes? Did she give all of them to him, and take them back? Had they broken up at the end and she didn’t tell me? Were these notes she never gave him? It doesn’t make sense, and it makes me realize that I know nothing. Something was going on and all I know is, I don’t know why Heaven didn’t talk to me about it. Why didn’t Heaven trust me?
I feel my breath speed up, and my cheeks flush hot. I realize I am angry. I feel betrayed. I don’t want to cry, here in the high school hallway, so I blink my tears back, swallowing a bitter taste that I think is loss down my throat. It burns worse than whiskey.

I snap the elastic band on my wrist, leaving a sharp red line. I decide to put all the notes, the dried flowers, and the necklace in the smallest of the boxes. I pull the elastic band off my wrist, and put it around the box as a seal. I take a deep breath, and exhale long and forceful, like a gust of wind down the storm. I flip my wrist and check the time on my Swatch. It is almost 1645, 4:45 pm. If my mom is running on time, she will be in front of the school for pickup in 25 minutes.

I drop the box I’ve packed for John to the floor, and it thumps quietly, like the sound of a dead body in a slasher movie at a sleepover. This morning, I rode to post with Mom, and told her I could walk over to the high school. On my way out, I peeked at the guard duty schedule on the wall in the MP station. John is on guard duty, right now. I don’t know if John wants to be reminded, but that is his decision, not mine.

I wonder if Heaven is haunting John, like she’s haunting me. Can a ghost haunt two people at once? I’ve been avoiding him since she did it, so I don’t know. I don’t know what I should say to him, either. I don’t know if I am sorry for his loss or if he should be sorry for mine. Maybe it wasn’t even a loss, for him. They’d only been dating, sleeping together, a few months. I’ve been taking care of Heaven for years. Trying to take care of her. What does it say about me that I fundamentally failed in taking care of my best friend?
Tammy sank to the cold cement steps in the damp moon-lit stairwell. The air was thick with decades of smoke from stolen cigarettes and hormones from hidden teen-age make out sessions.

Sometimes, after more than twenty years as a police officer, she thought she had seen it all, and the creativity she encountered would surprise her. Like the young personnel officer who, over the course of six years and four Permanent Change of Stations had used his specialization expertise to un-official-seal, alter, and re-official-seal his hand carry personnel records, and had managed to transform himself from an E3 Private to an O3 Captain, including a college degree from a small college ROTC program. Or the young finance wizard who’d figured out how to put 21 cents of every Leave and Earnings Statement he processed into his own account, amassing $342,572. At its best, her work was solving the New York Times Sunday edition crossword puzzle in red ink.

But sometimes, like today, when she thought she had seen it all, the weight of the possible depth of human evil pressed hard into the space between her shoulder blades.

They’d gotten a call to the emergency line at 1504 hours. A wife in quarters had heard screaming, loud horrible screaming she said, when she’d stepped into the stairwell to take her trash down to the basement. The patrol in the area had headed over. In the meantime, the desk clerk had noticed they’d had logged three other calls about screaming from the same building, same stairwell. The officer on duty started at the bottom floor, knocking his way up, and a few other residents said they’d heard screaming, too. When he knocked on the door of the third-floor apartment, the wife had kept the chain lock on, barely peeking out, said everything was fine, she hadn’t heard anything, and quickly shut the door. Back in his patrol car, he had called Tammy.
“Something just feels wrong, Ma’am,” he said. “Everyone else told me they heard noise, and she was spooked. What do you want me to do?”

Tammy was on her way back to her office, but she redirected her driver to head to quarters. She called another patrol car to meet them there, too. She trusted her soldiers. If something felt wrong, something was probably wrong. And if it wasn’t, they’d only waste a shared hour.

At the apartment door, Tammy knocked herself, her driver and four of her soldiers behind her on the landing, but out of the sightline. She didn’t want to scare the woman, if nothing was going on. Wives learned early on that unexpected officers at your door meant your soldier was dead, so she didn’t want to worry the woman unnecessarily.

“Ma’am,” Tammy said through the still locked door, “This is Colonel Balzac, Provost Martial. We had several reports of screaming in this stairwell, and we just need to do a health and wellness check to make sure everything is okay with you and your family. Can you let me in, please?”

Tammy leaned toward the still-silent, still-locked door. She heard footsteps and faint whispering.

“I’m fine, I promise,” a woman’s voice whispered.

“I need to see that for myself,” Tammy said.

“We are fine,” a man’s voice barked.

Tammy turned to her soldiers, eyebrow raised. They nodded. The husband was home. This was new information.

“Oh who lives here,” she whispered, hoarsely, to her team. “Call it in, get me name and rank.”
One of her soldiers stepped down a level, and returned a minute later. A major and his family lived in the apartment. Four kids, three in elementary school, one in middle school. Wife worked in the elementary school library.

“Major, open the damn door,” Tammy barked. “Open it now or we will take it down.”

Taking it down would take some work, since the government quarters were all World War II era buildings with bomb shelter sturdy doors. She hoped he’d open.

Slowly, the door creaked open, the wife hiding behind the bulk of the door. Even in the shadow, Tammy could see that her eye was purple and swollen. Her cheek was swollen like a grapefruit, and cracks of dried blood surrounded her lip. The husband, still in uniform, paced up and down beside the government-issue dining room table, where four children in perfectly neat and matching khaki pants and polo shirts sat silently doing their homework, without moving or even glancing toward Tammy.

“Satisfied?” the Major asked.

“I’m going to need to look around,” Tammy said.

Tammy slid gloves out of her cargo pocket, and began to put them on, as a precaution for potential evidence. The Major’s face darkened, and he turned, suddenly charging toward Tammy.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, bitch?” he roared.

Three of Tammy’s men stepped through the space, neatly containing and cuffing him in a swift shared motion.

“I don’t think. I know that I’m your superior officer,” Tammy said, her voice clipped and precise.

Tammy’s senior ranking officer began reading the Major his rights, and though he shrugged and pushed and grunted with exertion, another one of the team had him easily restrained.
Another soldier looked at Tammy, looked toward the wife, and Tammy nodded. He took the wife by her arm, and gently walked her to the couch, sitting her down, and then stood beside her, silently keeping watch. Tammy wasn’t sure, yet, what they needed to ask the wife. Tammy’s soldiers knew that when they were working with Tammy on site on a case, they should speak as little as possible, and wait to ask questions until she told them to. Tammy motioned with a slight movement of her head toward another one of her team, directing him to stand guard by the dining room table, keeping an eye on the kids. They remained silently sitting, little Stepford Wives zombies. Whether they were actually doing homework, Tammy couldn’t imagine.

Tammy began walking the apartment, her driver Miller one pace behind her. She pulled curtains back from the living room windows. They were perfectly Windexed, no streaks. She opened the kitchen pantry, organized by category, cereal boxes in ruler straight alignment. Tammy shook her head. She knew what kind of husband this Major was. There were soldiers who ran their families like their companies, and their wives faces showed the strain, just like this woman. Tammy opened and looked inside each bedroom door. Every room was perfect, neat, clean, organized, ready for barracks inspection. Tammy bet if she was wearing white cotton gloves, instead of rubber evidence gloves, she wouldn’t find a speck of dust.

As Tammy approached the bathroom door at the end of the hall, her nose itched. She stopped. She sniffed. She smelled urine. Feces. Vomit. And bleach. Tammy’s stomach dropped low into her torso, she felt a wave of the nausea she always felt when she saw the worst of human nature, and she wondered if maybe she didn’t know what kind of husband this Major was.

She pushed opened the bathroom door. Her gasp caught in her throat. Miller sucked air behind her. Tammy walked carefully toward the small figure on the floor, curled around the base of the pedestal sink, the bare skin of the child’s back ripped and torn and flayed. The child’s long
hair lay in a pool of blood. Vomit was in front of her nose at the base of the sink. Tammy placed her fingers at the child’s jugular vein, but she knew she wouldn’t feel a pulse. The child’s skin was cold, almost blue. Tammy stood up. In the corner of the bathroom, there was an open bottle of bleach, a dirty sponge, a roll of paper towels, a partially filled trash can. Clean-up job interrupted. She took a deep breath in, trying to calm herself, but the stench made her eyes water.

She turned back to Miller, walked toward the door.

“Call the 130th. I need a social worker to take those kids, figure out next of kin, get them shipped back to someone Stateside as soon as possible. I need an ambulance for the mom, book her into psychiatric on 24-hour watch. Call the morgue for this poor child. Make sure they’ve already got the husband in route to the stockade. Call another team to come help us mark all the evidence.”

“On it, Ma’am.”

Hours later, everything was done, everyone had gone home, and Tammy sat in the stairwell. She’d released Miller, told him she’d walk back to her car in the parking lot. A mile of air wouldn’t be enough to clear her head of the smell. She didn’t know how coroners did it. She’d never gotten used to the smell of death.

Tammy thought of Catherine. To Tammy, Catherine was a model child. Honest, straight A’s, did her chores and brushed her teeth without being reminded. But Tammy knew her daughter was perfect only to her. Catherine had a smart mouth. Like her mother. Catherine had a hot temper. Like her father. When Tom yelled at Catherine, Catherine yelled back, before running to her room and locking the door. When Tom drank an extra beer, Catherine hid his car keys. When Tom was rude once, to Tammy’s parents, Catherine’s beloved Grandpa Henry and Grandma Laura, six-year-old Catherine called him an obnoxious snob.
How beaten down had those four children been that they could sit silently staring at their homework while their little sister was dead on the floor in the bathroom? What Tammy couldn’t wrap her head around was how those kids could go to school every day, their hair perfectly combed, their khakis and polos unspotted, and do their homework and never do anything that made their teachers wonder. The post only had official records of the four school-age children. How had this poor child, who must have been about two-and-a-half, come into the world without anyone noticing? No pediatric appointments, no dental visits, no time at the childcare center. Any of those activities would have meant someone noticed the child wasn’t registered in DEERS. A child didn’t exist. And now she was dead. How long had she been chained to that sink, lying on the floor in her own filth?

Tammy wondered what pain the other four children had borne, if they had been punished at the same sink, and brushed their teeth over their non-existent little sister’s broken body. How much could children survive before they broke?

Tammy felt the tears slip down her cheek. She felt a new wave of hot rage at the mother. The mother had been beaten, too, obviously. Tammy had read rights to a fair share of soldiers turned in by their own wives. Wives who had covered their black eyes with makeup and sunglasses for years at wives’ club events called the MP line and gave up their benefits the moment they needed to protect their children.

This woman was a school librarian with a master’s degree. Tammy remembered her from a school library fair. A competent, educated woman let herself be destroyed. Complicit to the abuse of her own children. Tammy knew, professionally, that abusive men used the lobster approach. It started so small, and so gradual, that by the time the wife knew she was being cooked alive, she couldn’t escape.
Tammy knew she was a strong woman. She placed her hand on the butt of her gun, as if grounding herself in the physical strength of her position. Yet, she had to ask herself, she didn’t want to ask herself, what was she being boiled in? What had she come to accept, that she wouldn’t have tolerated when she was younger?

She shook her head in disgust, at the mother from today, but also at her own stupidity. Complicity. When Catherine had been four months old, when Tammy had finally healed enough physically and emotionally, her parents had come for a visit. She and Tom had gone on their first post-baby date and had their first post-baby sex. A week later, she was at her unit clinic with a raging fever, painful urination, vaginal bleeding. The physician on call had suggested a referral to counseling. Tammy had brushed him off. It must have been a fluke, she had told herself. Tammy didn’t like to admit to herself that, in sixteen years of marriage, she’d taken at least ten rounds of antibiotics for flukes that were clearly STDs. She lied to herself, usually. About her husband’s infidelity. About how much he drank. About the way his temper flared. No, he didn’t hit her. No, he didn’t hit Catherine. He wouldn’t dare. She’d kill him. He knew that. He wouldn’t dare.

She wondered, though, now, whether Catherine wore more subtle signs of abuse, a different kind of scar. Catherine’s best friend had stepped in front of an oncoming train. Catherine wouldn’t talk about it. Tammy didn’t know what was going on inside her daughter’s silent head. Had Catherine grown up in a world with so much trauma, that she didn’t know this wasn’t normal? Tammy thought she was protecting Catherine from the worst parts of her dad, and helping Catherine benefit from his best parts, but she could be wrong. This mother had made a fatal miscalculation. Was it possible for Tammy to be a smart officer, a competent soldier, an effective military police officer, and still be a dumb wife?
Tom stepped forward gingerly. His foot sunk up to his ankle in the sand, and he struggled to take his next step. The air was thick and heavy with the sandstorm, and he squinted under the bill of his cap to protect his eyes. His 80-pound ruck sack felt like it weighed twice that as he slowly trudged forward, blind to where he was going. The new suede desert boots felt heavier than his old black leather combat boots, and their tracked bottoms seemed to sink deeper with each step.

The wind stopped in an instant, and sand fell down like rain. Suddenly the sky was clear and he could see stars past the horizon in every direction. Turning full circle, he stopped at a flash of movement. He saw camels, battered jeeps, an Army of men in flowing gowns. He shrugged out of his rucksack, dropped it, fell to his belly on the sand. He pulled his rifle up beside him, aligned the site toward the men in the distance. As he pulled on the lock, the mechanism cracked and crinkled. It felt stuck, jammed, like it was filled with sand instead of bullets. Tom tried to yell for help, there had to be someone from his unit nearby, but his throat was parched and his grunt was barely a whisper.

He heard something from his left. The army of robed men was advancing toward him. He could see they were armed. Keeping his broken gun aimed at the men as a visual deterrent, he looked to his left. In the distance, he could see an oasis. Palm trees, a small pond, and his daughter Catherine. Cathy was standing with her feet in the water, waving her arms. He heard her scream and turned.

The air cools with sunset. Red light reflects off the sand in the distance. I shiver as the moon rises over the horizon. Far ahead, like an oasis, I see the outline of a person’s head and shoulders in the sand. Approaching, I see vultures circling. I see the glint of black and silver hair against a blood-red rock. I realize the rock is grey and brown when I see the streaks of blood,
trailing across desert BDUs. I hear the vultures trill. As I approach, they fly off. They land nearby, hovering, watching me, their heavy eyes dark, their faces shadowy in the dimming light.

Are they waiting for me? Waiting for me to leave so they can begin their feast? Waiting in case I, too, become carnage? I look in their direction.

The man is face down in the sand, blood pooling. I reach down, shifting silver hair, maroon and sticky, away from his temple. I try to move him, to shift him, to turn his body, so that I can better see his face. He is too heavy. I am cold as I sweat from the effort of trying. I press my palm in the center of his back, feel for breath or pulse, feel nothing, only stillness and the silence of the night.

I see the glint of silver chain at his neck. I reach inside the dark green t-shirt, pulling until the pendant releases and slips free. In the moonlight, I read the familiar dog tags.

My scream scratches my throat, waking me up. I hear a noise, and curl into a ball of fear. I don’t know where I am, if I’m still in the desert with the vultures waiting. I squint into the darkness, recognize the outlines of my dresser, realize that my wet shirt is my dad’s University of Alabama t-shirt, drenched with my sweat, tears, and snot.

I hear a click. The light flashes and I realize my mom is here, in my room, beside me. I fall back onto my wet pillow, relieved but not released. I cross my forearms over my eyes against the glaring overhead light.

“Dad died,” I say. “I found him, dead, in the desert.”

My mom climbs into my bed and drapes an arm across my shoulder.

“What do you want to talk about it?”

“Remember when he died before?” I ask.
I was younger and we were at Bragg. I’d been home alone late one afternoon, an hour between when my after-school activities ended and my parents got home from work. The phone rang. It was Dad.

“We’re going. Tell your Mom I’ll call her at work when I have access to a secure line. Be good, kid. I love you more than life itself.”

Then he hung up.

I was waiting on the front step to tell my mom as soon as she pulled into the driveway.

She told me what she was allowed to tell me. I know she knew more. His unit was jumping into Honduras. There was something going on in Nicaragua.

The next night, I dreamed I was flying with my dad in a helicopter, low over lush trees. The foliage was green and dense, thick with birds. There were waterfalls in the distance. The only sound was the roar of the helicopter, filling your ears as if you were inside your own heart. I watched my dad as he did his last pre-jump check. He walked to the edge of the open door, his full pack on his back. I sat cross-legged inside on the green metal floor of the copter, holding onto the handle by the door. The helicopter approached a rocky clearing, open and wide. He turned, gave me a thumbs up. He jumped into open air. I held tight to the handle, leaned slightly forward, watched him fall straight down. He never pulled the cord. He fell, straight down. I watched him crash, lifeless, into the rocks far below.

I woke up screaming that night, too. My mom came in and stayed with me, slept in my bed for the rest of the night. The next day, after math, the principal called for me over the intercom. I held my breath the whole walk to the front office. My mom was there, in uniform. We left from the school and went to the airfield. There had been an accident. They didn’t know, yet, the extent. I stayed out of school the next day. Mom took me with her to post. We met the medivac at the
airfield in the middle of the day. The helicopter roared. My heart pounded. Medics carried him off, on a green stretcher. He smiled at us, his mouth barely visible, a slit between the layers of bandage covering his head and face. He had a concussion. Cuts and scratches. His back was broken in three places. He was lucky. He was near a cliff face when his parachute failed. The wind slammed him into the rocks. He slid downward over rocks for a vertical mile. The cliff face broke his body, saved his life.

If he’d fallen straight, like my dream, he would have died.

“What if I’m right this time, too, Mom?” I ask.

“I don’t know, honey,” my mom whispers.

She begins to stroke my hair. Softly, she whisper-sings “Tomorrow,” from Annie, one of the few songs she knows, a song we’ve sung together since I was a little girl. This is what she does when she doesn’t know what to say. When there isn’t anything to say. When you just have to hold on.

I am scared. Scared of my dream. Scared of my life, this life. I am angry at my dad. I hate him, I am so fucking angry at him. Last time, his unit went, and he had to go, too. He is not in a deployable unit, this time. He should be safe at his NATO desk. He’s not even at war. Right now, he’s managing a loading dock in Stuttgart, begging and borrowing with everyone he meets, just trying to get closer. To get into combat. Obligation, he said. Why doesn’t obligation to us matter? Why does he love being a solider more than he loves me? Loves mom? He thinks the war is a goddamn Super Bowl and he wants to get to the show and come home with his ring. Civilians always say bullshit things like war is hell, so how bad must our everyday lives be if my dad wants to leave us to go to hell? I don’t want some posthumous medal because my dad showed his personal fucking red badge of courage.
“I don’t know,” my mom finally says, sighing. “I don’t know why he couldn’t just stay here.”

“Maybe he wants to die,” I say.

I turn towards her, and put my head on her shoulder. She strokes the top of my head as I cry.

“I don’t know, honey,” she says. “He’s safe, right now. He’s sleeping in a hotel in Stuttgart, managing rear supply chain. I don’t know what he’ll finagle next. I wish I could tell you he won’t end up in the war. With your dad, anything is possible. Especially how bad he wants it.”

“Can we sleep?” I ask.

“If you need me, I’m here.”

My mother’s breath becomes jagged and heavy. I know she’s exhausted. She hasn’t had a weekend off since the war started, and we’re on our own for groceries and chores since my dad took off on his war safari. He’s still a rear echelon mother fucker, so why the hell can’t he just be here at home? And why am I so afraid, when he isn’t in the desert, he isn’t in the sand, and he isn’t in the line of fire?

I think about my dad, who might end up killing himself.

I think about Heaven, who did.

I look up at the dark ceiling. I swallow the bitter taste of tears and loss down my throat. Why didn’t Heaven trust me? Talk to me? Why doesn’t my dad trust me? Or talk to me? Why aren’t I enough for my dad to stay home?

Rage flashes, anger muddied by guilt. I know I have failed them both. I don’t know what exactly I have done wrong or what I would do differently, even if I was given another chance.
Tammy hated department functions. When Tammy had been a new young Lieutenant, in those first few years out of college, before she’d met and married Tom, it was even worse. All parties were optional but required. At every unit function, she was the only woman dressed in uniform. Every other woman was either a waitress in black and white serving appetizers or a wife in pastel floral. In her dress blue uniform, Tammy stuck out like a water feature in a flower bed. When she tried to talk to the men she worked with, their wives glared at her. When she tried to talk with the wives, they glared at her. She didn’t fit in any of the party groups.

Once, she’d tried to engage her boss’s wife in conversation. The Colonel’s wife had angrily pointed out that her husband often worked late and spent more evenings with Tammy than her. Tammy had tried to break the tension, to comfort the older woman. She had reassured the older woman that she wasn’t interested in her boss. But the Colonel’s wife had been even more angry. She’d spit in anger, spun away, furious that Tammy didn’t find her husband attractive. It didn’t matter that Tammy didn’t want to sleep with these men. That she would never sleep with these men. Their wives assumed their husbands’ attractiveness and Tammy’s sexual interest. They were offended at the potential she would want their husbands, and even more offended at the insult of her lack of interest.

At work, in the same uniform and combat boots, Tammy could pretend to herself that she was the same. But the Dress Blue uniform was different beyond pretending. It was tailored, with a trim pencil skirt and black high heels. Dining outs were a sea of men in Dress Blues and wives in cocktail dresses and black shifts and the occasional ball gown. Tammy, with her hair piled high on her head, and her high heels and pencil skirt revealing the benefits of Army PT on long legs, stood out. At dining ins, with just the soldiers and officers in her unit, her subordinates and peers
often commented that she was, in fact, quite a good-looking woman. Either way, she was noticeably different than everyone else and belonged nowhere. But still, she was in uniform, her rank on her shoulders and her professional identity firmly in place.

If she hated her own department functions, she hated the wifely obligations of Tom’s department functions even more. Tom preferred, for his unit events, that she leave her rank at home. Especially now, that the Eagles sparkling on her shoulders made it clear she outranked him. He had made it perfectly clear how uncomfortable he was with her new rank. Her promotion ceremony had been in September. He’d shown up drunk and late. Catherine was already pinning Eagles on Tammy’s left shoulder by the time Tom had stumbled in. He’d gotten even drunker at the reception, even though only beer and wine were served at the 1600 affair at the Officer’s Club. Another Colonel who often gave Tammy a hard time and always made her feel like she needed to shower from the ways he leered at her, had come over and patted her shoulder.

Tom had gone ape shit. He’d sworn and paced, spittle flying everywhere. Then he’d fallen into a chair, sobbing. Tammy had felt an uncomfortably familiar mix of humiliation and anger. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to apologize to someone who made her life miserable for her husband’s unacceptable actions. She remembered the first time, after she and Tom had been married, that she’d complained to him about her boss hitting on her. That boss, a major, would always place himself in a room so he could pat Tammy’s ass on the way out the door. She’d told Tom. First, Tom had accused Tammy of making it up and imagining it. Then he’d accused Tammy of flirting, of bringing it on herself, of wanting the attention. Finally, he’d confronted Tammy’s boss at the gym, and swung a punch. Having to apologize to the asshole who’d sexually harassed her for her husband’s unprofessional behavior and then beg him not to report her husband for
insubordination was worse than being harassed in the first place. She had learned, early in their marriage, not to talk to her husband.

Tammy fingered the row of silk crowded together in the back of her closet. She looked at the collection of dresses that she packed from house to house. Her collection had grown, through the years, to pacify Tom, to soothe tom, to support Tom.

Tom always wore a calculated sense of ease. His uniform creased just so, his hair barely tousled, his smile easy as he knocked back gin, like someone out of a Fitzgerald novel. At his side, in civilian clothes, Tammy never felt quite adequate. Her college degree, the rank she had earned so that she didn’t wear her husbands, never seemed to make up, inside, for her lack of luster and bluster, her lack of a childhood of makeup and nail polish and coiffed hair. Tammy’s feet always felt too big. Her nails always seemed too jagged. Her voice always seemed too harsh. She hated civilian clothes. She hated herself in civilian clothes.

The first time she’d gone to one of his department parties as his wife, she’d carefully planned an outfit, a smart blue suit. She’d spent more money than she should have, because it looked like something Jackie O would wear. She had smiled at her reflection in the mirror, ready to make Tom proud. When she’d walked out of the bedroom, Tom had frowned. He’d furrowed his forehead.

“Brown shoes with a blue suit? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tammy had grown up in the Midwest on a small farm on the edge of town. Though they always had plenty to eat, they lived from and by the dirt. In her mother’s house, clothes were practical and functional. Dressing well meant keeping sturdy clothes clean. Almost twenty years of marriage later, and she still hadn’t internalized the clothing and accessory rules by which Tom (and his mother) judged her. She preferred her uniform. She didn’t wear her childhood when she
wore her uniform. Her uniform placed her rank and her identity firmly on her shoulders, with no unspoken rules to trip over.

Tammy sighed. She walked to the door of their master bedroom.

“Hey, Catherine,” she hollered, “Come’er, please?”

She heard Catherine’s bare feet pad down the steps, across the tile floor.

“What’s up?”

“Help?” Tammy said.

“Yeah, no worries!” Catherine answered. “Holidays around the world for NATO?”

“Yeah.”

“Go shower. I’ll get everything ready.”

Tammy kissed her daughter on the top of the head. She headed into her bathroom and climbed into the shower. The hot water came gushing instantly, steaming the bathroom. Her daughter had her father’s charm without his disdain for others. She knew how to dress and be in those situations. She knew how to dress her mother for those situations. Tammy scrubbed her hair, the bubbles tickling the line of her forehead. She let the shower pound on her shoulders, trying to tame the tension in her neck.

“Hey, mom,” Catherine said, entering the bathroom. “This is some of my red sparkle mouse. Put two dollops in your hair after you towel dry. Then holler and I’ll help you brush it out as we blow dry.”

“Where’s your dad?” Tammy asked.

“Watching TV, eating a sandwich.”
Tammy shook her head. Her husband would shower 30 minutes before they had to leave, then spend 15 minutes carefully combing his hair and spraying it with Aquanet. His tousled look took more effort than he would ever admit.

Catherine came back into the bathroom as Tammy was toweling herself off.

“Can I open the safe? I want to pick you out some jewelry.”

“You know where the combination is hidden.”

Catherine laughed. Tammy realized Catherine knew the combination without looking.

“I’ll be right back, to start your hair.”

Tammy was grateful that, when she couldn’t wear her uniform, her daughter was around to dress her like Barbie. With Catherine in charge, Tammy didn’t have to think about clothes, or what they said about who she was. She didn’t want to spend another moment thinking about what she should wear or if she really belonged.
The phone rings, the shriek shrill of a German phone so different from the bringggg-bringgg back stateside. At the second shriek, I know my mom is busy with something downstairs. I uncurl from my tangle of blanket and geometry homework.

I walk the few feet across the room and grab the beige handle. The phone in my room has a 30-foot spiral cord so it can reach all four corners of my room.

“Balzac residence,” I say.

“Yah, Hallo, Colonel Balzac, ya, yes, please?”

Normally, when I answer the phone, I play a game of my own creation. I made it up when I was about eight. It’s like that joke about the man and his son who are in a car accident, but the surgeon at the hospital says, “I can’t operate on him, he’s my son.” Feminists know the surgeon is the boy’s mother. Assholes are always confused.

Sometimes, when my parents are not the same rank, because my mom always gets promoted first, the game doesn’t work. Right now, because most people say Colonel even if they mean Lieutenant Colonel, it still works. In the game, when I answer the phone, I say “Balzac residence.” The person on the other end says, “Colonel Balzac, please.” I say, politely, “Who do you want to speak with, please?”

My mom’s people know the deal, so they don’t play the game. If it’s someone who works for her, they say, “Can I please speak to your mom?” If it’s her boss, and they are nice, they say, “Catherine, dear, please put Tammy on the phone.” If it’s her boss and they are not nice, they say, “Get your mother to the phone.”

My dad’s people are an Abbott and Costello script. My record time for game play is thirteen and a half minutes back at Ft. Bragg when they were both majors. Thirteen and a half minutes of
“Major Balzac, please.” “Okay, who do you want to speak to?” “Major Balzac.” “Yes, who do you want to speak to?” until finally the 82nd Airborne major exploded across the line, “Put your Goddamn father on the phone,” and I said, “Well why didn’t you just say so in the first place?”

My dad has only been back home four days, and I am out of practice. So really, everything is all my fault. If I’d remembered my favorite game, we wouldn’t be in this mess. Months of my dad being gone and all calls being for my mom messed up my habits. I cover the mouthpiece, leaned out into the hall, and hollered down three flights of stairs.

“Mom, it’s for you.”

Then I sit with the phone barely at my ear, listening to hear the click that she has picked up.

“Colonel Balzac speaking,” she says.

Her voice is low and raspy. Fatigue has permanently altered her tone. I wish I could tell you why, I wish I had a good excuse, like I could say I had a flash of psychic inspiration, but really, I’m just slower than usual and before I hang up, it gets so I don’t want to hang up.

“Yah, yes, Colonel, this Frau Greta from your favorite Haus.”

My mother says nothing. The woman continues in her faltering English, her German accent heavy like dripping syrup.

“I have the good news. When I clean beds, I find your medal, the Saint Cristopher, in bettwasche, um, the bed linens, of Frauline Linda. I keep for you. You visit Frauline Linda soon, ya, yes?”

“Hmm,” my mother says, slowly. “I’ll give him the message.”

“I no speak to Colonel Balzac?” the woman asks.

“You speak to Colonel Balzac.”
The phone clicks. My mother has hung up. I hear the woman breathing on the other end. I hang up, too. I look at the clock. My dad should be home, soon. Supposedly, he is working late.

Haus means house, and it can mean guesthouse, like a small hotel. I know, with a sick feeling like I’m going to throw up, that she didn’t mean the Guesthouse on post in Stuttgart where my dad officially stayed the last few months. She meant a house of prostitution.

I think, maybe, you can tell a lot about a country by how it treats and places its prostitutes. Like, in Italy, when we went on vacation last summer, there was a tree and field area across the area from the back gate of Camp Darby, across from the transportation depot. There were like, literal, gypsies with wagons and clothes lines and picnic tables set up in the field. The women that lived there were called the Depot Dollies, and apparently, they were always open for business, just like an airport bar.

Back in the states, if you visit any military base, along the main drag leading to the post, there will be a stretch of dingy buildings with signs like Girls!Girls!Girls! and Totally!Naked!Women! and Adult Videos.

Here, in Germany, there are clean, white-washed houses where prostitutes work. The government makes the women take regular tests for sexually transmitted diseases. From the outside, the houses look like any other row house or town house, with a clean swept front stoop and curtains across the windows. When they are in business hours, the light on the front porch is turned on, and its literally a red-light bulb. Red light district. There is one of those houses right across from the Heidelberg post shopping complex. When we go to the PX complex for shoes or clothes or books or groceries or eyeglasses, there it is, across the street from the Military Police security check, blink, blink, blinking its red light. The Fraulines sometimes sit in rocking chairs
out front, smiling, speaking English. I assume there are similar houses near every US military base in Germany, because GI Joes are good customers.

It’s hard enough to think about your parents having sex with each other without freaking out. The idea of my dad being a good customer at a whore house, to get a personalized follow-up call for the medal he told us was stolen, may leave me puking for the rest of my life.

I look up at the small TV on the table by my little blue Ikea couch. The screen flashes with cheap computer graphics of water going drip, drip, drip down the drain on AFN, the Armed Forces Network. Fraud, waste, and abuse, a drain on national resources. Taking home the cheap plastic black pens with U.S. Government engraved on the side is a threat to national security. I miss real TV commercials more than I miss current season sitcoms. Little old ladies looking for beef. McDonalds lyrics you want to learn and sing with your friends. Catchy Super Bowl jingles with a life of their own. Silly infomercials like Clap On, Clap Off, the Clapper! But right now, I hear drip, drip, drip. Resources bleeding away, eroding security. Eroding trust. Eroding love. My family, down the drain with the dirty water from Frauline Linda’s sheets.
The tile of the shower floor was cold. The water pounding down on Tammy’s back and head was barely warm, approaching the end of the hot water supply. Tammy knew she should get up off the floor, turn off the water, get out of the shower. She couldn’t force herself to move.

Another wave of nausea swept through her torso. The bitter taste of bile hit her tongue. She leaned out of the shower stall, to the small bathroom trashcan, and heaved again. Again. And again. She opened her mouth up, the shower stream pounding into her mouth, rinsed her teeth, and spit down the drain. She leaned her head against the shower wall. Her chest heaved up and down. She was out of vomit. Out of tears. Out of energy to move. Out of everything.

Tammy could hear feet pattering outside the bathroom door. They were light and quiet, like a cat, and she knew her daughter was pacing, worried. She knew she should stand up. She should call out to Catherine, let her know she was all right. Okay. Alive. She couldn’t find her voice in her throat.

It shouldn’t hurt so much. It shouldn’t be such a surprise. She knew Tom had a string of affairs over the course of their marriage. Another way he was his mother’s son. His boss’s wife. A young soldier he met at the club. They were always one-night stands. He always begged and pleaded and apologized. They’d never meant anything. It was just sex and booze and lust. He loved her. Loved their marriage. Loved their life. Did it really matter if he paid for it? Was it worse for your husband to cheat on you with someone you knew, or to go to a prostitute? A hooker. Sex worker. That couldn’t be love. Why did it hurt so bad? Why did she feel as if something in her was irrevocably broken?

She had to have seen it coming. All the nights they had fought. All the nights he had been gone. The days he was home and they were barely talking. Almost two decades of growing
distance, resentment, swallowing down her own rage. She didn’t know if she was angry at Tom. Or angry at herself.

He was so angry that he had never made it to war. He wouldn’t earn a combat patch. He would be the first man in three generations of his family to not serve in combat, at this point. Even his younger brother, the baby, had gone to the desert as a junior captain.

She wasn’t his personnel officer. She didn’t work his assignments. She hadn’t fucked up his career, the way he had, over and over and over. She had saved him so many times. When he had fucked his boss’ wife, she’d finagled with her personnel officer to get him moved to a new unit before his boss fired him and issued a referred OER. A referred Officer Evaluation would have meant career suicide, and she’d saved him. When he’d been an idiot and hadn’t done inventory when he took over a new command, and thousands of dollars of government property had been missing when he turned over the command, she’d spent days of her own leave time, what should have been a vacation with Catherine and her parents, leaving Catherine and her parents to road trip without her, instead in a dusty, dirty, warehouse, helping him find and tag and identify as much as possible, so he was only docked one month’s pay and wasn’t charged with losing government property. Or worse.

She had saved him, saved his career, begged her obnoxious bosses to help him for her sake, over and over again. And he resented her. He was mad at her. He hated her. He was so ungrateful and so jealous that he’d gone to a whorehouse. Just to humiliate her.

What could she say to her daughter?

What could she say to her mother?

What could she say to herself?
She tried to stand up, but her legs gave out, and she splashed back down on the tile floor. She groaned, as she felt her low back seize up with pain. The tightness gripped around her sciatic nerve. Her eyes welled with tears from the searing fire in her right buttock. She heard Catherine whispering, and then she realized she heard Tom whispering, too.

With a heavy shove, Tom barreled through the locked bathroom door and into the room. He was still in uniform. Tammy could feel the room changing with his presence. She wanted to ask him, to beg him. He would tell her it wasn’t true. He would lie, if she asked him. How many times had he already lied to her, to protect her feelings, save their marriage, keep the façade? She had held onto his lies like a baby blanket protecting herself from the cold truth of their marriage, of what had betrayed herself by accepting. She almost choked on her sorrow, and only a weak cough came out of her lips.

He walked to the shower, turned the water off, and wrapped Tammy in a large towel. Like Richard Gere carrying Debra Winger, he effortlessly took her to bed. He placed her down on their bed and brought the fluffy down comforter up to her chin. He knelt down beside the bed, his hand on her shoulder. He gently pressed his lips to her forehead, where he lingered for hours. Every kiss they’d ever had merged into one kiss, one moment with the weight of all their years together. She thought of their first kiss, in the rain, outside her apartment in Fayetteville, so many years before.

“Remember that night, when I called you from a phone booth to tell you I loved you for the first time?” Tom said.

They were remembering the same night. He’d called from a phone booth, said he loved her and couldn’t live without her. He’d shown up at her door a half-hour later, and they’d kissed in the rain for an hour. Finally, she had invited him in. And he never left.

Tom bent forward, buried his head in her stomach. He sobbed.
“I’m so sorry, baby,” he whispered. “We’re going to be okay. We always turn out okay.”

She kept hearing the phone call in her head. She realized that she hadn’t heard Catherine’s click, and that her daughter must have heard the call, and her daughter must have told her husband, and that no daughter should ever have to talk to her father about his infidelities. She thought of all the times he had sobbed on her lap. All the times she had stroked his hair, comforted him, in his grief, after he hurt her. How many times had he said sorry? How many times had he lied? How many times had she been such a fool? She didn’t know what else she could have done.

The weight of her marriage pressed on her chest.

“Just leave me alone,” she finally choked out, in a calm, quiet whisper.

The room was silent. Tom didn’t respond. This wasn’t part of their script, she knew. They raged at each other. They screamed and hollered and yelled profanities. He apologized and sobbed and she babied him, as if he were her wounded son instead of her wounding husband. She understood, with a deep pain in her stomach worse than childbirth, that her calm, quiet whisper changed everything. Tom paced the room back and forth. Her eyes were closed, and her face was buried in her pillow, but she could see him, smell him, feel his tension as he walked up and down the length of the oriental rug on the side of the bed.

Finally, he spoke, a tight, pinched voice, like when he returned a steak that he didn’t think was cooked right.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll leave you alone,” he said.

He walked out of the room. He shut the door behind him.

“Hey, kid,” she heard him say, his voice artificially bright, a cocktail party drink-ordering-tone. “I’m going to stay at the guest house on post. Keep an eye on your mom.”
A few minutes later, the house shook with the weight of the lead-glass front door being slammed. Tammy, still wrapped in her damp bath towel, fell into a fitful sleep.
My dad grabs the last of his bags off the front porch. I sit down on the edge of the top step. The marble is cold and damp through my jeans. I watch him carry the bags across the street to the parking lot. He hovers over his open hatchback.

“Hey,” he grunts. “My clothes are a wrinkled mess. I’m going to have to take all my uniforms to the dry cleaner to be pressed.”

He glares across the parking lot, his voice loud and angry.

“Tell your mother not to fuck up my shit.”

I feel my jaw tighten, twitch, spark, as I clench my teeth. For the past three days, I came home straight from the school bus and worked until my mom came home late. I got his suitcases and his duffel bags down from the attic, by myself. I went through their closet, by myself. Their bathroom, by myself. The front hall closet, the living room, by myself. I spent so much time. I packed up my dad’s stuff. Just like I cleaned out Heaven’s locker.

I knew what he was like. I had been careful.

“I packed your stuff by myself,” I say through my teeth. “Do you want me to pay for the dry cleaning out of my allowance?”

He says nothing. Shrugs as he slams the back end shut, then walks silently around to the front of his car. He leans against the hood of his silver Porsche, his denimed legs crossed at the ankles, maroon-sweatered-arms crossed over his chest.

It could have been a beautiful day, alive with early spring. Birds chirp, grasshoppers click, and the bumblebees hum. The fragrant flowers seem to speak. The wind rippling through the growing wheat field behind the parking lot whispers. I stick my right foot in the dirt on the side of the steps, drawing lines with the toe of my Timberland near the tulips just barely peeking up.
“I want my jacket back,” my dad says, suddenly, breaking the silence.

I don’t look up. I hug myself, clutching at the faded green polyester of my sleeves. He had said he was coming for his stuff. He never said the jacket. I hadn’t thought about the jacket.

My eyes get hot. I bite the inside of my lip, lift my gaze to the sky through narrowed eyes, will myself not to cry.

“It’s not your jacket,” I say.

I breath slowly, trying to keep my voice steady. He will not see me cry.

“Catherine, I want my jacket back.”

I have learned not to argue with that tone. At least, not to argue with it when my mother isn’t around.

Slowly, I slide out of the jacket. I trace the dark embroidered wings, the embroidered Balzac nametag. I hug the jacket to my chest. At school, you can always tell when someone has broken up. The guy shows up the next day wearing his own letter jacket again. Guys take back their jackets when they break up with you.

What does it mean that my dad is taking his jacket back? Can your dad break up with you? I know he is leaving my mom. Is he leaving me? Is he going to stop being my dad? If he takes back his jacket with the nametag Balzac, is he going to take back the name Balzac, too?

I am angry at him.

I am angry at myself for caring if he is.

“Why?” I yell. “You don’t have flight status anymore. You aren’t even authorized to wear it. That’s why mom made you give it to me in the first place.”

I realize my voice is loud and grating and whiny.

I don't want to whine.
I look across the street at my dad when I hear the crack of his knuckles. His left hand tightens into a fist. The vein on the side of his forehead pops out, his blue cord of anger. His eyes squint down tight, and he stares me down, like we are gunfighters facing each other across a dusty street in the old Westerns I used to watch with Grandpa.

I keep my voice loud but lower my tone.

“Take your stupid fucking jacket back.”

I get up, walk to the middle of the street, and throw the jacket at him across the distance.

He plucks the jacket from the air with one hand. He walks around to front of the car, opens the door, and throws the jacket onto the passenger seat.

He looks at me for a while. The silence lingers, our own war.

I glare back.

“I’m really disappointed in you, kid,” he says.

I take a deep breath. I spread my legs, stepped into the fighting stance he taught me. I press down through my heels to feel the strength of the ground through my legs. I lift my chest and lower my chin, protecting my neck. I wrap my hands in tight, fists clenching, thumbs on the outside. My knuckles crack loudly. I meet his gaze threw my squinted eyes.

“Yeah?” I raise my eyebrows. “Well, I’m really disappointed in you.”

My dad has six inches and at least 100 pounds on me. As he slams his car door and clears the remaining distance in two steps, his face glowering like a rabid bulldog, I will myself not to flinch. Not to blink. Not to move. Not to back down.

He leans into me, over me, his breath hot on my forehead, blowing my eyelashes like a storm.

I stand still and solid against the force of Hurricane Dad.
“You have no Goddamn right to be disappointed in me young lady. No God Damn Right.”

I don’t blink. I don’t break his gaze. I reach up and wipe his spit off my cheeks, and flick my fingertips so the drops splash back on his face.

I shrug.

“Yeah, well, I am,” I spit back.

He backs away, suddenly, stepping back toward his car, open palms by his chest, as if my whisper was a knife slicing the air, slicing his heart, slicing his conscience.

Or maybe my mom had gotten up from her icepack and her migraine in bed and is looking out the 2nd floor window that used to be their bedroom, glaring him into submission like she’s always done.

I do not turn to look, refuse to break his gaze to see if she is there.

My dad may be a Ranger and an Infantryman and a Paratrooper. He may be able to kill with his bare hands, but she was stronger, has always been stronger, is still stronger even now that that he’s broken her.

I remember, suddenly, being ten years old, in another house in another town outside another Army base. My father, angry at me, had his hand ready on his belt. My mother’s voice, low and dull, echoed through the halls, “I swear to fucking God if you lay one hand on that child, I will get my gun and I will shoot you in the fucking head.”

Every single dad I know has a loaded gun in the closet. Our house is the only one where Mom has one, too.

My dad climbs into his car, and the slam of the door echoes in the silence. I watch him through the windshield. He won’t meet my gaze. Fucking coward. He turns the key, and Rick Astley blares into the space, a bizarre juxtaposition of a pop promise of eternal love and my father
leaving me. The gears crunch as he shifts into first gear. His tires squeal on the concrete of the parking lot. He veers in a sharp curve around me and out into the road.

I stand in the middle of the street in the cool of evening, shivering in my t-shirt as the temperature drops, watching my father’s silver Porsche accelerate and disappear down the grey road ahead.
Tammy sighed with disgust at her aching bladder. She’d finally found a position where her back wasn’t cold and the throbbing spike through her right eye socket had settled to tolerable. Gently, she placed her left palm flat against the mattress and gingerly pushed herself up to sitting. She pressed her feet flat against the warm tile of the radiant heat floor. The room was no longer spinning, but the tiles undulated like waves under her feet. She pushed up to standing and walked with zombie-arms in front of her, reaching for the doorway, as she made her way to the bathroom. On the toilet, the nausea crashed up through her ribs. She grabbed the trashcan beside her, throwing up thin bitter black liquid, the remnants of her morning coffee from 15 hours prior, all that she’d been able to choke down through the long workday.

At the sink, she bent forward, resting the side of her face on the cool porcelain. The left half of the counter was bare. Tom’s half. His toothbrush and Colgate and green bottle of Scope. His striped can of Barbasol and the straight-edge razor. The narrow black plastic comb and the can of Aquanet he needed to perfectly part his dark, lush, carefully arranged head of hair. Everything was gone. Only the glistening sparkle of hairspray and the faint color of rust from the shaving cream can remained.

She stood up, splashed water on her face. She stared at her ruddy cheeks, her dark, hollow eye sockets. She’d lost weight, and her skin hung as loose as her uniform had that morning for work. A faded camouflage skeleton. Her forehead was furrowed with deep lines. She’d aged a decade. She looked to the left, the empty hook on the back of the door. Tom’s brown velour robe with the gold piping was gone. So were the matching brown slippers. Presents from his mother last Christmas. Yet another Christmas with lavish presents for the beloved son, stingy presents for the eldest grandchild, nothing for the wife.
Her mother-in-law was probably dancing for joy. A jig while the devil played his fiddle.

Tammy didn’t know whether to feel grateful that Catherine had packed everything up, without her even realizing it, or guilty that her fifteen-year-old daughter had shouldered the responsibility of her father’s move-out.

Catherine must be traumatized. Suffering. Sorrowful. She hadn’t shown it. She hadn’t expressed it. She’d been silent when her best friend committed suicide, and silent when her father killed their family. Stoic. She got that from her mother. The mother she used to have.

Tammy padded back to bed. She burrowed deep into the sheets to hide from the stream of moonlight revealing the emptiness on Tom’s nightstand, Tom’s dresser, Tom’s side of the bed.

Tammy woke up with a start. Catherine’s hand was firm on her shoulder. The left side of Tammy’s face was numb. Her pillowcase and sheets were wet with tear, sweat, and loss.

“Catherine, honey, what’s wrong?” Tammy said.

Her voice sounded distant, rough in her own ears.

“Mom, it’s 7!” Catherine said.

Tammy sat up quickly, forgetting her migraine. The pain instantly reminded her. More than twenty years of active duty had permanently established her internal body clock. She always rose at 0500, without an alarm. Tammy squinted at the clock. She was confused by the 0700 in red, blinking at her, disobeying her. Her head pulsed from the sudden movement, blinking with the red lights like music at a disco.

“Did you set your alarm?”

Catherine’s smooth forehead wrinkled with concern.
A teenager should not have to mother her mother. Tammy tried to stand up, to steady herself and return to her own strength, but she fell back to the bed. Catherine quickly sat down beside her, putting her arm around her shoulders.

“Mom, your sheets are soaked. Let me feel your forehead.”

Catherine pressed her palm to her mother’s forehead. Tammy had done the same thing for years on her daughter’s forehead.

“You’re burning up! How do we get you to sick call?”

The nausea rose, again. In the back of her mind, Tammy wondered if her fever meant her husband had given her one last gift requiring yet another round of antibiotics. Tammy belched. Her ribs heaved, but there was nothing left. Nothing left in her stomach. Nothing left in her heart. Nothing left.

It was a forty-five-minute drive to post, to the Army hospital. A month ago, Tom could have driven her. Would have driven her. They could have dropped Cat off at school on the way, saving her the bus ride.

A new wave of anger pounded behind her eyes. When they’d arrived in country, Tammy had wanted to live in quarters on post. Tom had wanted this big, grand, beautiful house, with the radiant floor heating and stained-glass windows. Tom had cried that he needed the house. Tom had begged that he had to have the house. Tom had thrown a temper tantrum that he would never be happy again unless that had this house. For two years, Catherine had to ride a bus 45-minutes twice a day, five days a week to get to school. For two years, Tammy had to get up at 0400, in order to make it to work on time, and sometimes she didn’t make it home until midnight.

She knew that this morning, Tom was safely ensconced in his bachelor’s quarters on post. Maybe with another prostitute at his side. Or a private. But he wasn’t at work. He was still asleep
without the alarm that had been his wife. Tammy was stranded 45-minutes from post, with no friends to call for a ride. She was as trapped and isolated as the young wives who came overseas unsponsored by the command. She was angry at Tom for everything he had done. She was angrier at herself for letting him do it.

“I don’t have any tests today. I’ve got all my books home. I’ll call the school office. I’ve barely missed anything this year,” Catherine said.

Tammy opened her mouth to protest. A teenager should not have to mother her mother, she wanted to say, again. A choked sob came out instead.

Catherine stood up, and gently folded her mother back onto the pillow. She disappeared. Tammy heard running water in the bathroom. Catherine returned with a cold washcloth. Tammy relaxed into the soft, cool material over her eyes. Catherine sat down on the edge of the bed, one hand on her mother’s head, and picked up the phone from the nightstand. The sound of the rotary dial vibrated in Tammy’s ears with each number. She fell into the depths of her pain, until she heard Catherine pulling her back to the surface with a whisper.

“Do you think you can manage the stairs? Maybe some chicken soup?”

Tammy stood up slowly. The floor remained in place. The spike through her right eye had moved to her left socket. The mid-morning light through the rouladens glared and scowled. The clock blinked 0900.

“I called Grandma,” Cat said.

Tammy could hear her mother. One of the cousins had divorced last year. *Those women who can’t keep their husbands happy …*

“She already talked to a travel agent. She’s landing in Frankfurt tomorrow morning.”

“Honey. I can’t miss another day of …”
Catherine kept talking over her mother.

“I asked our landlord, remember his friend, from the Christmas party? He’s a professional driver. He’s going to pick her up at the gate. I told him she speaks German, but she’s not used to traveling alone. He’s going to be right outside customs with a sign, like they do for rich people in the movies.”

Tammy collapsed into the couch. She heard Catherine rustling in the kitchen. Her daughter had called her mother. Her mother had somehow arranged her own flight and was traveling internationally by herself. Was she doing that poorly? If she wasn’t her, if it was anyone else, would they be this worried? If she was a normal housewife, wouldn’t taking to bed with a migraine for a few days after your husband left, after you discovered his string of prostitutes, wouldn’t it be normal, maybe? To not eat. To have a headache. To not be sure, exactly, at least so soon, what to do next.

Tammy thought about her guns. Her service pistol in the holster in the lock box in her military vehicle on post. The private handgun, 9-millimeter, hidden in the duffel bag under her bed, the loaded cartridge ready for insertion in an emergency in the inside pocket of the duffel. The hunting rifle back at her mother’s farm, her childhood farm, probably still loaded in the corner of her childhood bedroom, next to the old twin bed. For all her training, all of the drug raids and emergency entrances in her career, she’d never shot a person. Deer. Turkeys. Possum. Hunting with her dad. Never a person. Not even in the foot. The weapon itself had always been deterrent enough. She was a good shot. Would a strong woman take action? Would killing him be better than weeping? Would the spike in her skull impact her otherwise perfectly trained aim? She could see the clean hole between his eyebrows, the blood soaking the nubby faded sheets of the furnished on-post room.
It was bad enough when he’d had affairs. As she thought about the prostitutes, the bile rose up onto her tongue.

Good money, fucked down the drain.

What did it say about her? Their marriage. Their family. She couldn’t place her feeling. Embarrassed. Hurt. Betrayed. Angry. It had to be his mother’s fault. Her husband in Vietnam, and she moved her enlisted boyfriend into the house, in Government Officer’s Quarters, with her five children under age 12. Tammy had stroked Tom’s lush dark hair as he cried in her lap with the memory. He’d never been able to look his father in the eye. Tammy was supposed to save Tom from himself. To teach him fidelity with her mid-west, middle America, Lutheran farmer values. Oh, he’d praised her kind eyes and her strong hands.

You’re so strong, he’d said in her lap.

You’re so strong, he’d spit at her last month.

Oh, God, the genetics and family history of it all! What did it mean for Catherine? Cathy. Cat. Was she her father’s daughter or her mother’s child? Condemned to repeat their sins, but which ones? Condemned to caretaking for them all. How could Tom do this to their child? His child. His only daughter.

The phone rang, a shrill spiral of electricity through the quiet room. Tammy realized she still hadn’t called in sick.

“Shit …” she started to say.

Catherine had already answered the phone.

“Yes,” Catherine said calmly, politely. “She’s really sick … I stayed home today, too… okay, thanks.”
“It was your XO,” Catherine whispered, silent as a ballerina. “If you’re still sick tomorrow morning, he’ll send your driver out to bring you into the clinic.”

Catherine handed her mother a mug, powdered Chicken noodle cup-a-soup, still dissolving into the hot water.

“It will be nice to have Grandma here to cook for us,” Catherine said.

Tammy nodded, barely grunting.

Catherine curled her feet up under her legs, leaned against her mother’s arm, and pointed the remote at the TV. Catherin turned the volume low, flipping through the channels: BBC news, Starz, and British MTV flashing as she passed through. Tammy closed her eyes, leaned back against the soft cloth of the couch. She inhaled deeply, smelling her daughter’s scent, mixed of apple shampoo and grape hairspray, and her bangs, coiffed for school, were stiff against Tammy’s cheek.
“Enough? Already?” My grandma asks, her pale eyebrows knitting together.

I blow out a long, satisfied sigh through pursed lips, then I push back from the table. I pat my stomach, bloated and pushing out the button at the top of my jeans.

“Grandma, it was so totally completely amazingly awesome. I am so, so, so stuffed.”

I look down at my plate, the crumbs of a cinnamon roll and a caramel roll, scraps of custard from apricot coffee cake, a tiny bit of crust from the fresh bread, the smear of sparkly, bumpy, red from her homemade raspberry jam. I look to my right, out of the nook and into the kitchen, the large pot of raspberry jam still cooling on the stove, the baked goods spread out across the counter on racks, the roast and corn and green beans glowing in the light inside the oven.

I get up from my seat and walk around the table to her. I wrap my arms around her warm neck, and feel my eyes well up.

“Grandma, I’m so glad you came.”

My voice breaks with the weight of it all. I let go of her neck, and pull the closest chair over beside her. I sit down close to her side, leaning my head on her shoulder, breathing in her warm, sugar and flour scent. I wonder if she smelled like this before she was a grandma, or if this is a special grandma fragrance.

The first few weeks, we were fine. They had just finished their bi-weekly trek to the commissary, before the phone call. Like usual, they came home with the back seat of my dad’s car overflowing, the hatchback on the 911 so tightly packed it popped open like a spring the second he put the key in the back lock. Like usual, he had to unload the floorboard around my mother’s feet before she could get out of the car. After filling the pantry and the freezer and the fridge, and dumping packs of soft American toilet paper by the door of each bathroom, my mom had done all
her usual weekend food prep. The fridge was stocked with cut carrot sticks and hardboiled eggs. Sliced onions and lettuce and tomatoes for sandwiches and salad. Blocks of cheese and chilled bottles of Orangina.

After, even though I was worried that my mom didn’t seem to eat, there was food for breakfast, salads for dinner when we got home. On the weekends, I made tuna casserole, scrambled eggs with onions.

But several weeks in, the fridge was empty. I had to get up a half hour early to walk to the bakery and grab a brochen before I walked to the bus stop. I was eating lunch at school, which meant barely having time to eat, since most of the half-hour lunch period was spent in line waiting to buy something. Dinner was tuna, Campbell’s soup, ramen, as the stockpile in the pantry dwindled. Near my high school, there was a Shoppette, the on-post version of a convenience store. They sold toilet paper, milk, and eggs, just like any 7-11 back in the states. But I couldn’t figure out how to bring the bags on the school bus without having to answer a whole lot of questions that I didn’t want to answer. Shouldn’t have to answer. Couldn’t figure out how to answer.

I was worried about her. My mom. I wasn’t sure she had eaten anything or slept more than an hour at a time since my dad took off. Maybe an hour total. The bags under her eyes reach her cheekbones, now. Her uniform hangs loose like a dress off her shoulders. The lines across her forehead and around her lips have furrowed deep like canyons in the desert. She used to look young for forty-something, the kind of young that sometimes, in the right light, when I dressed her up right, she still got carded when she ordered hard liquor.

She seems to be keeping it together at work. Soldiers maintain security patrol at the gates. Arrests occur for unauthorized acts. If she was falling apart at work, G.I. Joe would be taking advantage, skipping shifts, handing out warnings instead of citations to save paperwork, and
generally letting safety and security fall to minimum military police standards. She hasn’t missed a meeting or a briefing or a mandatory PT. Her unit and her Joes still run with precision.

My mother is a highly effective military police zombie, a pale undead soldier, murdered by her own broken heart.

Two nights ago, for the fifteenth night in a row, she ate nothing, skipped a shower, climbed into sweats and cried herself to sleep. I started thinking about Marianne, in *Sense and Sensibility*, where heartbreak almost became a death sentence. And about Heaven, in, you know, my real life, when heartbreak became a death wish. And I don’t know how much space you are supposed to give people before you can no longer trust them with themselves. While Mom was sleeping, I dialed the twelve-million numbers it takes to make a state-side connection, and called Grandma.

Oh, thank God for Grandma. Grandma is here. If my mom was exactly who you might picture when you think Warrior Princess (at least, before she became the Undead Soldier), then her mom, my Grandma, is the movie-and-book version of Strong Pioneer Woman. Just 48 hours after I talked to her, and Grandma has done a cross-Atlantic flight, a train ride, a ride from the airport, and somehow, a German grocery store stop in route. Grandma showed up at the door with a trunk full of groceries.


Someone to take care of my mom.

Someone to take care of me.

My stomach is still full, but my mouth waters as the smell of dinner fills the room. When you’ve been living on PB&J and tuna sandwiches, it takes a while to feel full again.

The sky outside the window is dark, red and orange fading into black with the last of the sunset. The room is dim and quiet. With my head on my Grandma’s shoulder, I feel safe. At home.
Part of a family. It makes me miss summers with Grandma and Grandpa Henry. It’s been a while since I felt this loved.

I look up at the clock – almost 1800 hours. I wonder when my mother will be home. I wonder whether her mother’s food will be enough to entice her to eat. I wonder how anyone could turn down fresh bread, hot from the oven. I wonder whether Grandma will feel as comforting as a mother as she feels as a grandmother, or if that makes it different for them, between them.

I wonder how long my Grandma will be able to stay, if she’ll be able to stay as long as we need her. I wonder if Grandma can bring my mother back.
The morning air was cool. The pink sun was just rising over the horizon.

“Sailor take warning,” Tammy muttered.

“What’s that?” Laura asked.

“I was just saying, pink sky, storm is coming,” Tammy answered.

Tammy and her mother were walking the lake. It was a two-mile route, which Tammy ran for PT training, and walked for stress relief. It was nice to have her mother along for company. Actually, Tammy had been pleasantly surprised, how good it was going with her mother. She had expected judgement. Stress. Comments about women who couldn’t keep their husbands happy, like when her cousins ended up divorced. Her mother had been supportive. Nurturing to Catherine. All of Laura’s anger had been directed at Tom. And his mother, whom Laura blamed for everything. Laura had tried, through the years, to befriend Tom’s mother, to hold her tongue and laugh off Ginny’s snark about simple farm folk. Laura had almost twenty years of pent-up emotions and forced politeness spilling out in like a raging river.

Tammy remembered that, even if her mother could be difficult and prickly on a day-to-day basis, there was no one better in a crisis. In a flood, in a tornado, if your cows were killed in a snowstorm. If your horse or your wife was delivering breech. In a snowstorm with the power and the gas all out. If your husband had walked out without a word. Laura always came through when it mattered.

Tammy heard the familiar call of the cuckoo bird. She laughed. She told her mom how, the first few months in Germany, walking this route, she’d tried to find a house or a cottage or a cabin. She was convinced someone must have a cuckoo clock, out here in the fields and forests around
the lake. It’d taken her a while to realize it was a really cuckoo bird. She hadn’t realized cuckoo
clocks actually sounded like cuckoo birds.

“It’s good to hear you laugh, Tammy,” her mom said.

“Honestly, it feels really good to laugh,” Tammy answered.

“Now we just need you to eat,” Laura said.

Tammy had lost weight since the night everything broke. Fifteen or twenty pounds, even. She tried to eat. She couldn’t swallow. The food didn’t go down. What went down came back up. She drank water, coffee, choked down dark toast. Her mother had started making thin cream of wheat, stirred with whole milk, the same thin gruel she’d put in a glass bottle when Tammy had been an underweight toddler.

“It’s just all so much,” Tammy said, to herself as much as her mother. “I’m worried about Catherine.”

“Oh, he makes me so mad I could spit in his face,” Laura said. “His Porsche that he had to have, and all those designer clothes, and jewelry and technology. Raising the girl like a millionaire’s daughter, when she was just as happy as a pig on the farm with me and Grandpa without all that crap. He builds her this fancy life, and then, he pulls the rug out. Just like that. He’s a piece of work. Just like his mother. Always thinks she’s better than me. So high and mighty. She never even went to college! I have my nursing degree. Somehow she’s the better one just because she’s never worked a day in her life.”

“Catherine hasn’t said boo about it. Hasn’t cried. Just asks how I’m doing. It just doesn’t seem right,” Tammy said, quietly.

“It isn’t right, for a man to disappear from his kid like that. He told me once, his mom used to send him to his room when he got in trouble, but he hid candy and comic books in there. He
never learned to do better. Still acting like a kid, putting himself first, hiding in his room with candy and comic books.”

The spring breeze rustled through the trees. The air felt thick and heavy, rain was coming. Spring rain to bring flowers. New life. New hope. Tammy wished she could feel that kind of hope.

“You know how I spent today?” Tammy said. “This week. I was in another post-SWA after-action discussion, and there are five young women being kicked out because they got knocked up over there. Because they’re pregnant, it’s pretty damn, sorry Mom, darn clear they had sex over there. It’s proof of a UCMJ violation of the rule against fraternization. They’re out.”

Tammy’s words flooded out in pace with her steps.

“But what about the men who they slept with? There’s no proof of the men, so that’s that. I’ve been fighting that it’s not fair, but I’m just hitting my head on the wall. General doesn’t care. I had to shift all my energy today, anyway. Lunchtime, a full Colonel threatened a 21-year-old wife, a little clerk at the PX, because she wouldn’t give him a refund on a stained shirt when he didn’t have a receipt. He told her a detailed plan for how he was going to kill her, how he’d be waiting outside the PX at the end of her shift with his gun. When her manager called it in, I had to go myself. He’s a big mucky-muck, and I didn’t want to set up one of my soldiers to fail. I cuff him and book him and read him his rights. I’ve got him in the back of my vehicle, when the General calls me on my radio. I had to drive him to the General’s office and release him into the General’s custody. The General ordered me not to log the incident. He’ll handle it off the books.”

Tammy sighed.

“You know what I think makes me saddest, Mom? I should be shocked. But I’m not. It’s just the way it is.”
She was so tired of the weight of it all. The officers and gentleman who weren’t. The heroes who were anything but. Her career path in the Army had meant twenty-three years of seeing the worst of everything, the worst of everybody. She didn’t see the glory. She only saw the gore. She didn’t know if she believed in goodness anymore. She didn’t know how to have faith in people. How to trust. Whether that was even possible.

She had believed in Tom, believed his apologies and his excuses, and forgiven him so many times. She had been so horribly wrong. She couldn’t trust her own instincts anymore. Maybe she’d always been wrong about everything. She didn’t know how to move forward.

“Tammy,” her mother said, “Maybe enough is enough. You’ve done enough years. Get out.”

Laura walked a little further. She stopped, stooping down to cup a tulip along the side of the path.

“Come home,” she continued. “To be honest, I could use the help. If you don’t come home, I’m going to have to sell the farm. I can’t manage it anymore, without your dad. Maybe I could have a few years ago. It’s too much for me, now.”

Tammy looked at her mother. Mid-seventies, but still farm woman strong. She could plant a field and shuck corn. Kill a deer and bleed a pig. Raise kids and animals and keep house and keep up with her husband all those years in the field, while also teaching at the farmhouse school and delivering every human or animal baby that needed help being delivered for a three-county radius. Could her mother really need help? Was she just giving Tammy an out? Did it even matter?

“I don’t have enough time in rank to retire as a Colonel,” Tammy said. “If I put in my papers, they could say no. And if they say yes, I’ll retire as a Lieutenant Colonel.”

“So?” Laura answered. “Who cares? Who will even know?”
If she retired, now, her monthly retirement pay would be a little more than half-pay, based on her years over twenty. She and Catherine would have health benefits. Maybe her mom really could use the help. The farmhouse was certainly big enough for the three of them. It’d be good for Catherine to have a few more years with Grandma, before college. For Catherine to be in a real town, in the real world. Maybe Tammy didn’t want to be in the military anymore. Maybe the military had never really wanted Tammy in the first place. Maybe it was time to get out.
By 2300 hours, you know, 11 pm, I am done. Finished. Over. Enough. I am tired of the goodbyes and the empty promises to keep in touch and be friends forever. I’ve been through this enough time, and it’s all bullshit. You will be best friends forever. You’ll write every week. You’ll never forget each other. And you write for a little while. I’ve accumulated books of addresses with move after move, updating new addresses every time we all move again. You have to keep track of who is stationed together at the same post, and write them all at the same time, with the same details, or you get a pissy note in the mail about being forgotten or why do you like her more. It’s too much, and just nonsense, and who the fuck cares, anyway.

Everybody will have forgotten me a few months from now. I know this, now, because it’s like Heaven never even existed. She is fucking dead, maybe scraps of her still lingering in the grass along the train tracks by the school, and nobody seems to care. Or even remember. The girls in my crowd who are downing red Gin Fizzs like Gatorade after cheer practice haven’t learned anything from what Heaven taught us.

Not to mention, and this really pisses me off, but I just walked around a dark corner under the arches of the Heidelberg Castle, and there was Travis with his hand up someone else’s shirt and his tongue down her throat. Yes, I’m moving next week, but we literally have not broken up. He could have given me the decency of a break-up speech, or at least waiting until I was on the fucking plane. And then, five minutes later, asshole Max approaches and wants to tell me all about his friend who has always had a crush on me and wants to make out with me. The friend’s cute and I’ve always had a crush and it’s serious bullshit that he never asked me out when, you know, we could have actually been something, and it’s even worse that now he has to send his buddy to ask because he isn’t man enough to do it himself.
So, I am gone. Done. Glad that I am leaving on a jet plane. I won’t be back again.

I head down the cobblestone path by myself. My mom is supposed to pick me up at 0100, but she’s always early. I figure I’ll grab a burger and fries at McDonald’s and sit on a bench under a streetlight near the parking lot. I will be in a safe, public space while I wait alone in the middle of the night. Unlike my friends, I am not a moron. I know how to keep myself safe.

As I approach the parking lot, I see someone sitting on the bench. From a distance, I can make out BDUs and combat boots. And then, in crackle of the streetlight, I recognize the bright blue eyes under the cover pulled low and tight over his brow. I haven’t seen John since I returned his notes and necklace after cleaning out Heaven’s locker.

That’s not true. I’ve seen him. And then I’ve quickly turned the other way before he saw me.

I take a deep breath and approach.

“Hey, Nebraska,” I say.

As I sit down on the bench, I smell him. We barely know each other, but it’s a smell I think I will always remember. A mix of Eternity and sweat and nicotine and the tang of Mountain Dew and the crispness of menthol. I’ve never smelled anyone else like this.

“Hey,” he says.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I know you are out of here. When I heard about this end-of-school party at the guard shack, I figured I’d try to catch you. Say good-bye.”

My shoulder is a couple inches from his side. We are not touching, but it feels like we are. Like small flashes of lightening crackling between his shoulder and my stomach. I feel hollow
inside. I wonder how he kisses. I shouldn’t wonder. I remind myself to think about that he is a GI.

I remind myself to think about Heaven.

“Did you love Heaven?” I ask.

We are silent. We sit there, on the bench, in the bright overhead light and the silence for days. They only dated a few months, before she did it, so love is probably way too strong of a word.

Finally, he speaks, barely a whisper. I have to lean in to hear him.

“I asked her to marry me, you know.”

He says this like he thinks I know this.

I didn’t. I cough. I try to say something.

“I guess you didn’t know that,” he says. “Did you know she was pregnant?”

I didn’t know that.

But now I understand. Heaven is not the first high school Army brat to get knocked up by a GI Joe. Sometimes, they get married and a girl goes straight from Army brat to Army wife. Sometimes, the girl disappears back to the states, to live with a Grandma or an Aunt, and the guy goes to Leavenworth. Statutory rape and whatever else an angry dad can get to stick through the military justice system. Heaven’s bravery was all boobs and bravado. She was a scared little girl under all her tight clothes and dark eyeliner.

“My mama raised me, you always do the right thing. Soon as she told me about the pregnancy test, I bought a ring at the PX. I remember she was wearing orange nail polish, and it was chipped at the edges, when I put it on her finger. I’m sure I would have figured out how to love her. Someday. I would have done right by the kid.”
There is nothing to say. Heaven was my best friend. I tried to protect her. Heaven got knocked up. Heaven killed herself. I tried to do the right thing, but I failed in the first place.

I change the subject.

“Why’d you join the Army?” I ask.

He shrugs.

“My grandparents are farmers. There’s no money in it, not anymore. My dad packs meat for a living. Both of my brothers pack meat. There’s a lot of meat in Nebraska.”

He laughs, but he sounds sad.

“I didn’t want to pack meat. I want to go to college. I played football, but not good enough for college. My dad said this was the best way to get the money. Otherwise, I gotta pack meat.”

“That’s cool,” I say. “College is a good idea.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I hope I get there.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He stares off into the distance.

“Can I be honest?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, why not?”

“I’m scared shitless.”

I just wait. This is what my mom does, when I say something and she knows something important is coming. She just looks at me, and waits. He clears his throat. He bites his nails, which I notice are chewed down to the quick.

“I thought I’d do 4 years, I’d get to come to some cool country and travel, and I’d meet cool people, maybe learn another language, earn money for college. Who the fuck am I? Some 18-year-old idiot from Nebraska and the first time I flew on an airplane ever was to come here. Right
after we got here, there was the war. Some guys from my barracks didn’t come back. Maybe some war memorial will remember their names, but they can’t remember shit because they’re dead. Now, I stand at the gate all day long with nothing to do but think about how I’m disposable. I’m a trash bag. A paper towel. Used Kleenex. Those guys went home in body bags to their moms. When the next war comes, and I am the one who comes home in a body bag, will anyone be honest with my mom and tell her that I was a disposable hero who didn’t mean anything to anybody but her?”

“Give me your hand,” I say.

He puts his hand out. I reach for it, and place his hand inside the center of my palm. He slides closer to me, leaning against my side. His chest is a solid sheet of rock against me. He bends his face low beside my neck, and whispers in my ear.

“What are we looking at?”

His breath is warm and wet against my cheek. I feel the pit of my stomach drop low into my hips, and I feel warm and tingly inside.

I trace his lifeline with my index finger, down his palm to his wrist.

“Do you see how long this is, how it almost wraps down to your wrist?”

“Yeah,” he whispers.

“And see how it’s really smooth and clear, without any breaks or cuts or anything?”

“Okay,” he whispers even softer, lower, yet somehow deeper.

His mouth is touching my ear. I can just barely feel the heat of his lips on the edge of my inner ear. I feel a slow deep pulse in my stomach. I drop his hand and pull away. I stand up, walk a few steps away from him.

“Well, that’s a really good sign. You have a long healthy life ahead of you. You don’t have to worry.”
My voice is loud and fake in my ears. He stands up, walks toward me, and his eyes literally twinkle. Like blue Christmas lights.

“Well, maybe you’re my good luck charm,” he says. “Maybe I didn’t have to go to war because I met you.”

I smile. I shrug. I decide this is another reason I am glad I am moving. I don’t want to see him anymore. I don’t want to feel this way. It’s weird to have these kinds of feelings for someone who got my best friend pregnant and then dead.

“So, you’re going to Nebraska, now, huh?” he says.

“Grandma’s farm.”

“You’re not stalking me, are you, kid?”

I laugh. It is funny, that of all the Joes from the Midwest, this one from Nebraska is the one I am somehow connected to, as we are moving to Nebraska.

“No more military bases. That’s gonna be a big change for you,” he says.

“Tell me about it. I still can’t imagine.”

“Maybe I’ll get a chance to see you when I come home to see my mama.”

“Maybe.” I pause. “Yeah, cool.”

“Yeah. So maybe I’ll see you sometime. Maybe I could write.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You gonna miss your friends?” he asks.

I think about this.

“Nah, not really. I’m used to it. This is just how life is.”

“What about that boy,” he asks. “You gonna miss him?”

“Who, Travis?”
“Yeah, that one.”

“Nah. That was nothing. He’s already replaced me and I haven’t even left yet.”

“Did you love him? Think he loved you?”

“He said he did. It’s just pretend. I don’t know if it even counts as puppy love.”

He grabs my hand, and pulls me up against his chest. He feels as solid as a wall. The feeling of his BDUs are so fundamentally different than my mom or dad’s when they hug me goodbye. He looks down at me. I know I need to look away. I should look away. I always thought those romance novels, with all their drowning and melting in someone’s eyes, their week knees and aching loins, were bullshit. But I get it, now, in this moment. I am stuck, pulled in, absorbed. I have never in my life wanted someone to kiss me so badly, and I’ve also never been so completely afraid of losing myself in a guy before. He leans down, but he doesn’t kiss me. Again, his mouth is at my ear.

“What about me. You gonna miss me?”

I recognize the throaty tone of his voice as longing. I know that for all the flirting I’ve done, and all the boys I’ve kissed, and all the petting I’ve done, that I don’t know anything about this. I breathe him in, and the smell of his Calvin Klein Eternity is darker, warmer, and heavier than it smells in the bottle. I know I am not ready to feel like this. I knew when I first met him, I wasn’t ready for this. I can’t handle it, now, either. I step back. He lets me go, but his fingertips linger and trail up my arm, a river of electricity as I pull away.

“You going to be okay?” he asks.

I want to memorize his scent, the blue of his eyes in the dark, the feel of his chest against me. I want to remember it always. Like the way, when I think of Grandma, I can smell apple pie and fresh baked bread. I think of Baby in Dirty Dancing, most of all, I’m scared of walking out of
this room and never feeling the rest of my whole life... the way I feel when I'm with you! Tears well in my eyes. My chest heaves in a big sigh. I will be okay.

He puts his arm around my shoulder, and kisses the top of my head.

“You’ll always be my good luck charm, kid,” he says.

“Thank you for coming to say good-bye,” I answer.

We sit on the bench, side by side, in silence, until I see the headlights of my mom’s car.
Tammy stepped onto the sidewalk just before the first notes of the retreat bugle call. She placed her briefcase at her feet, turned toward the tall flagpole, and stood at attention, her hand in salute. This would be the last time she stood at attention, in uniform, for the daily lowering of the flag. More than twenty-three years of standing at attention for reveille at 0700 and retreat at 1700. Whatever you were doing, you had to stop and salute the flag. Entire companies stopped PT runs in their tracks. If you were driving in your vehicle, you stopped and got out. Everyone, even wives and children, were obligated to show respect, though civilian family members stood with their hands on their hearts. Just as they did during the National Anthem at the parade grounds, at the start of every post function, and before every movie in the on-post theater.

Tomorrow, Tammy would begin her terminal leave. The next day, she and Catherine would fly home with Tammy’s mother to Nebraska, to begin their new life. Technically, Tammy would still be on active duty for the 90 days of leave, until her formal retirement date. Technically, as a retiree, she would always be subject to recall in the event of a national emergency. But practically, today was her last day in uniform. As the bugle call ended, and the soldiers walking past her saluted and said “Ma’am,” she knew that this was the last time she would walk through an Army post, in her uniform, with Eagles on her shoulders, soldiers saluting.

Tammy had cleared her desk. Shredded her personal notebooks. Said good-bye to her soldiers. Handed over the keys and the inventory to a new young Lieutenant Colonel who would serve as Acting Provost Martial for only four weeks until the new Provost Martial arrived. A male Colonel, of course, with three years in rank already.

Across the street, Tammy saw the familiar shape of Tom’s back. On a street full of uniformed men, she could still recognize her husband.
“Tom,” she called.

He began to walk away from her.

“Tom,” she called, a little louder.

He walked a little faster.

“Lieutenant Colonel Balzac!” she barked, in her trained command voice. “I order you to stop right now!”

Tom stopped. He did an abrupt and precise about-face. He came to attention and faced her.

Tammy walked toward him, slowly. Tom remained at attention.

“Jesus Christ, Tom,” she said.

She heard her voice, sad and wounded, and she was angry at herself for letting him hear how she hurt. She looked at his face. She saw lines around his eyes. A slight start of a roll under his chin. New grey that wasn’t quite such brilliant silver peeking out along his temple, under the edge of his hat. She realized that, though he was still handsome, he wasn’t as handsome as she remembered. He looked older, sadder, less beautiful. She thought that was a good sign, that maybe she was starting to heal, maybe she loved him a little bit less, maybe he’d never been as handsome or as charming as she’d convinced herself.

“At ease, Balzac,” she said, “but you are not dismissed.”

Tom’s face softened. He smiled. He almost laughed.

“Ah, Jesus, Tom,” she said. “What the hell happened to us?”

He didn’t answer.

“You know, I knew something was wrong. I knew I was losing you. One night, when you were in Stuttgart, I almost drove down. To the guesthouse. To find out what was going on.”

Tom cocked his head to the side. He looked wistful. A little sad. Maybe even a little lonely.
“I didn’t know that,” he said. “I didn’t know you loved me enough to fight for me.”

Tammy sighed. Her eyes felt hot. The back of her head thumped. She shrugged.

“It wouldn’t have mattered, I guess,” she said, more to herself than Tom. “You weren’t at the on-post Guest House. You were at a whorehouse. It wouldn’t have mattered if I had come.”

Tom’s face hardened, again. His lips tightened into a scowl. She saw the flash behind his eyes, and realized she had seen that before. She wondered how long her husband had hated her. If the hatred had always been there, poisoning the love, slowly seeping into their lives and marriage, maybe even poisoning the way she felt about herself, too. Was she really always feeling insecure, inadequate, incompetent, out-of-place, or was that how Tom saw her, how Tom had convinced her to feel? Had she seen herself through Tom’s eyes all these years?

“Just make sure you come say goodbye to your child. Our child. Your daughter. Do the right goddam thing for once in your life,” Tammy said.

Her voice was hard again. Her heart felt a little harder, and she felt a little more love drain away. Not all of it. She knew, deep inside, that if he begged, apologized, took the blame, she would forgive him again. If he just said he was sorry. Admitted he was wrong. Told her it was all his fault.

Tom said nothing. He didn’t make eye contact. He didn’t smile. He didn’t blink.

“You’re dismissed,” Tammy said.

Tom turned, sharply, a parade-perfect about-face. Tammy watched him walk down the sidewalk without another word.
As I pack up the last of my shit, I smile and think of John. Nebraska. He gives me hope. Maybe he is my good luck charm, too. Maybe one day I will meet someone and feel like that and it won’t be complicated by age and rank and my dead pregnant best friend. Just knowing what it feels like inside. Holding his hand, I felt more than anytime I made out with Travis. I feel like it’s something to look for. To hope for. To hold onto. For when I’m older and can actually handle it.

My mom’s driver, Sergeant Miller, is taking time off and driving us, on his own time, to the airport tomorrow. Right now, my mom is with him and his wife, dropping our car off with transportation to be shipped back to the states. We’re taking the punch buggy with us. Grandma and I are packing up the rest of the food in the kitchen, so that Miller’s wife can take all the rest of the food home with her in the morning.

The movers came a week ago, and everything we own is on a barge somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. We checked beds, a couch, a table, plus sheets and linens out from the housing supply office. It’s normal to camp in your house before and after each Permanent Change of Station. Although, this isn’t really a PCS. We’re not moving to another station. My mom is retiring. We are leaving the service. I was never in the Army, and now I’m not.

Grandma plops on the nubby orange Army-issue couch and fiddles with the antennas on the TV. I head upstairs to finish prepping for the morning. We’re down to our final wakeup, and we have to hit the road by 0530, so I don’t want to have to do anything more than get dressed in the morning. I put out my favorite acid-washed jeans and my peach sweater with turquoise stripes woven in. I set up my peach Keds and my turquoise scrunchy socks. I’m not going to wear any earrings, since I’ll want to sleep on the plane, but I leave out a stack of sliver bracelets, and several real turquoise rings. I pile my outfit on the dresser, and pack everything else up in my suitcases. I
make sure my backpack is ready to go for the plane: a comfy old-man cardigan for when the plane gets cold in the middle of the night. A couple of Salinger paper backs, the newest issues of *Seventeen* and *YM*, and some Hubba Bubba for when my ears pop. I’ve got my Discman, too, and some CDs. My dad gave me the Discman for my 15th birthday. I wonder if it will be the last birthday present I ever get from him. I wonder if he will come to say good-bye.

I carry my bags down, and line them up in the front hallway. My mom and I each have four bags to check, plus our carry-ons. Grandma only has two. I’m glad she stayed with us the last several months. I’ve gotten really used to her being around all the time, and I’m glad we’re going home with her. I have lost so many people this last year, and I don’t want to miss another person in my life.

Grandma is on the couch, watching *Cheers* on *AFN*. I snuggle in beside her and lean on her shoulder. On the commercial break, another cheesy reminder about fraud waste, and abuse, she turns and looks at me.

“All packed up, Cathy?”

“Yup.”

“How are you feeling?”

“All right. It’s the last wake-up.”

“How are you feeling overall?”

“He has to come, right, Grandma?”

My dad knows we are leaving. My mom’s unit farewell was last week. There was the end-of-year-goodbye party. Everyone on post knows everything about all the hail and farewell parties. Plus, just to be safe, I left three messages with my dad’s department secretary, giving her all the details, every single time, of our departure flight. And I’d told the Post Chaplain, who is a friend
of my dad’s, and they have lunch every week, and also, he’s the Post Chaplain so doesn’t he have, like, a moral duty? I wrote out all the details of our departure flight, and gave it to the Chaplain in person, myself. So, I know my dad knows we are leaving. He knows. He has to come say good-bye.

By 2200, he hasn’t shown up, and I’m tired.

“Maybe he’ll come in the morning, Grandma?”

Grandma kisses the top of my head, but she doesn’t answer. I guess she doesn’t know what to say.

The buzz of the alarm comes early, I can hear it buzzing in my mom’s room. The blinking numbers on my clock are 0400, so I burrow back in my pillow.

It feels like a moment later, when I feel my mom’s hand on my head, but the clock says 0445.

“Five more minutes, please?”

“Sorry kid, we really can’t today.”

I pull myself out of bed. I stumble to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and take a super-hot, super-fast shower. The clock says 0515 by the time I’m dried off, and I realize I gotta move. I throw on my clothes and jewelry, pull my hair into a ponytail, and shrug at my reflection in the mirror. I’m glad there won’t be anyone I know on the plane. Makeup isn’t happening. I scoop the last of my bathroom stuff into my backpack, and head downstairs.

Lights reflect in the entry way. A car pulls in front of the house. My heart stops with anticipation.

I open the door. The car door slams. It’s Miller. His wife’s car pulls up behind him. I take a deep breath. I will not cry.
We load the bags into his car, and the boxes of food into his wife’s car. We are ready to

go, but I want to stall five more minutes, just in case.

“Mom, I gotta pee.”

When I get back, he still isn’t there. We load in Miller’s car. Grandma up front, Mom and
me in the back, with our backpacks and one of the suitcases. It’s a little bit crowded, but not the
worst I’ve ever been squished in a car with bags.

It is dark on the road. When cars pass us, going fast on the route to Frankfurt, I wonder if
it could be Dad, driving fast to catch us before we get on the plane. I remember when we were
stationed at Bragg, and he was in training for 10 months in Georgia. Every weekend, he came
home. We met him at his gate every Friday. He would stop and kiss Mom, and then he’d scoop
me up and swing me in a circle. I would carry his briefcase, and he would carry his suitcase, and
I’d hold his hand as we walked to our car in the airport parking garage. When we moved to
Germany, he had to come a few weeks before us. Mom and I landed in Frankfurt. He was right
outside customs. I could see him through the glass wall. He walked alongside the glass wall right
beside us the whole length of the hallway, smiling and waving. As soon as the customs agents
waved us through, it was the same: he kissed Mom, then he picked me up and spun me around.

When we get to the airport, as we unload the bags and my mom gives the ticket agent our
government travel vouchers for our extra and excess weight suitcases, I hover near the front. I’m
keeping an eye on the loading and unloading zone, just in case I see a familiar silver 911. We say
good-bye to Miller, and he pats me on the head.

Once checked in, we head to the international terminal. I walk slowly, dragging my feet,
checking out the duty-free shops. Even if Dad gets there, he won’t be able to go through customs,
so he won’t be able to come to the gate. I don’t tell Mom that I’m waiting for Dad. I don’t know
how to tell her, and I know I’m probably being stupid. We only have an hour before our flight, and I can see she’s getting nervous. There is no sign of him, anyway.

We go through customs. The German guard is young and cute, probably early 20s. He smiles at me. Maybe my hair isn’t so bad after all.

“Tschuss, ahh? Bye-bye!” he says.

“Tschuss, danke,” I answer.

I get lucky. Our gate is the first one inside customs. If my dad does show up, I will see him right outside. I pace, doing loops, keeping an eye.

“Hey, mom?” I ask, finally. “Do you think we could wait until the very end to board? I mean, just in case?”

“Sure, honey,” Mom says. “Let me go find out when that will be.”

My mom walks up to the boarding agent, and shows her the tickets. The gate agent speaks English, and my mom asks her about when boarding will start. And then my mom leans in and whispers. The agent clutches her chest like it hurts. She makes a lot of clucking sounds, like a mother duck.

“They are going to start boarding in about 5 minutes,” Mom says. “They will keep the boarding open for about 20 minutes. They will come get us right before they close the door so you can wait as long as possible.”

I hug her tight.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I walk in circles between the space in front of customs and the row of airplane seats where Mom and Grandma are sitting with our backpacks and Grandma’s purse and satchel of snacks.
Always, I keep my gaze focused outside of customs. I am hoping to catch a glimpse of his dark hair.

Maybe he will come. Maybe he will come. Maybe he will come.

He has to come. He has to come. He has to come.

I see the back of a dark head, and I start to walk toward the customs threshold. The man turns, he is much older. I look, I hope, I cross my fingers. I am willing my father to come.

I feel a hand on my back. I jump. I turn around.

“I’m sorry, honey, it’s time.”

I put my arm through my mom’s arm. I squeeze her elbow.

“Thanks anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I walk back to our stuff. I bend down, and pick up my backpack. I loop my arm through my mom’s again. I want to stay connected. I also want to be able to keep looking back, without running into a wall, just in case he makes it. I look back until we turn the corner down the ramp, and I can no longer see the boarding area.

I take a deep breath. I exhale, forcefully. I will not cry. I will not cry. This is not the first time I’ve had to remind myself that I will not let my father make me cry.

He isn’t worth it. I will not, will not, will not cry.

We get lucky on the plane. Our seats are a couple of rows behind the movie screen in the middle of the plane. I can see the screen perfectly. Also, we are at least a dozen rows behind the smoking rows, so the smell won’t be too bad. Coming to Germany, we were the first row of non-smoking, and I spent the flight hacking up ash.
Grandma and Mom tell me to take the aisle seat, so I can watch the movie. I strap my seat belt and listen to the safety briefing, first in German and then in English. Then I lean forward and grab the Discman out of my backpack. The CD inside is the *Pretty Woman* soundtrack. I decide to keep it in.

I put the headphones on, and tilt my head over onto my mom’s shoulder.

Life has to get better from here.

I was stupid to think I loved Travis. You can be really dumb when you don’t know what you don’t know.

I think about John and Heaven. They had sex but not love, and it had still been so much that now Heaven was dead.

I think about John and me. I’ve never even kissed him, but maybe it’s possible that it is something like love. I wonder if he’ll ever write to me, and if I even want him to, or if the idea of him, the idea of love, is better for me, right now.

I think about Dad. I wonder if he loves me. If he has ever loved me. If he could possibly love me, when he didn’t even care enough to say good-bye. I am his only child, moving thousands of miles away across an entire ocean. How could he have been my father one minute and then just walked away the very next? How could he love Mom one minute, and then not even care what happened to her the very next? I don’t understand him. I don’t understand what he did. I don’t understand any of it.

I realize that maybe my mom doesn’t understand any of it, either. That seems scarier than anything, that you could be forty-something years old and still not understand love or life. I worry for my future, if I’ll ever understand. Boys like Travis. Guys like John. Men like Dad.

I wonder if my mom is feeling sad and alone and scared.
Maybe Mom is as scared as me.

I reach over, and take my mom’s hand.

“Well, here we go again,” she says.

She squeezes my hand. I squeeze back.

“You and me, kid,” Mom says. “You and me, kid.”

With the time difference, we will be stateside in New York for lunch. After two connections, we will be in Nebraska with Grandma for dinner.

Roxette purrs in my ears, *it must have been love, but it’s over now, it must have been good, but I lost it somehow. It must have been love, but it’s over now ...*

I lean my head against my mom’s shoulder, and I close my eyes.
Vita

Kimberlee Bethany Bonura earned her B.A. in Psychology from Thomas Edison State College (now Thomas Edison State University) and her M.S. and Ph.D. in Educational Psychology (with a research emphasis in Sport & Exercise Psychology) from Florida State University. Her doctoral dissertation, *The Impact of Yoga on Psychological Health in Older Adults*, received the 2008 Dissertation Award from the Association of Applied Sport Psychology and the 2008 Dissertation Award from Division 47 (Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology) of the American Psychological Association. Bonura has served as a faculty member at Florida Southern College (Physical Education); the State University of New York – New Paltz (Psychology); the United States Military Academy – West Point (Department of Physical Education; Center for Teaching Excellence; and the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership); Walden University (Center for Faculty Excellence; School of Psychology); and the University of Denver (Continuing Education Instructor, Center for Professional Development). She develops and teaches health and wellness courses for a variety of platforms, including *The Great Courses*, *Highbrow*, and *Listenable*.

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