Your Leaving

I don’t remember your leaving.

I remember your coming home—the argument I had with your parents, the bubble I felt around myself while among joyful families, the Shoney’s breakfast we shared before coming home to have sex on the kitchen floor. I remember the jubilant look on your face, your blue eyes glowing, like lasers, over cheeks burned by the African sun. I remember the eight-inch knife you slid under the driver’s seat of your car. I remember the night sweats and bad dreams and that you were losing hearing in your left ear.

But I don’t remember your leaving.

I remember the weeks leading up to your departure, fuzzy memories of the night you came home to tell me that you were going. We sat on the sad little patio of our condo, on beach chairs with unraveling seat straps, smoking Marlboro Lights, even though we had quit two years before. Darkness covered us like a blanket, and we were numb. You were headed to war, to Somalia, a country so broken it had no government, but this fact was slippery, a puzzle with a complex, indecipherable solution. The president ordered you to make peace and gave you an M-16 rifle and flak vest. You said it was like being invited to dinner, only to climb with a weapon on your back through a broken kitchen window, rather than stand under the front porch light, ringing the doorbell.

I remember the five months you were gone, when I felt both empty and content, filling that emptiness with my own choices: watching hours of television, going out for Mexican food with friends, teaching math to my students. I remember how the seven-hour time difference made you seem as far away as you actually were. I remember sending you care packages, like you were a college student spending weekends in a chemistry lab. In those five months were Labor Day, your birthday, Halloween, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving.

There’s grittiness to these memories. They are sand in my eyes, irritating, never fully washed away. This is forever; this is permanent, impairing my sight without blinding me. The before and during and after has altered the present and future. Yet, I don’t wonder how we would be different if you hadn’t gone. Because you did go. And I stayed. We traveled along parallel lines for those five months.

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We watched *Platoon* at a theater where we could drink pitchers of beer and smoke. It was the summer before our senior year in college, and you were an ROTC Army cadet, all hoo-wah going into the darkened room, where we found seats together at a long table. The floor was sticky and the air thick with smoke. I thought we were so cool, but I was terrified. I had never watched a war movie.

From the first scene, I felt gutted. That damn soundtrack— Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings"—reached into my belly, pulling one slick and shiny nerve at a time. You grew quieter and quieter, your bravado deflating with each horrific scene. I hid my eyes as much as I could, gulping Bud Light and pulling cigarette after cigarette from the cardboard box. You lit each one for me with a plastic Bic you kept in your front jeans pocket. As the credits rolled, we sat slumped in our chairs, unable to move.

We left groggy—from the beer and the brutality of the images. I couldn't cry or rage against the ways in which the characters were made to feel in the heart of violence, how they became feral and unfeeling. I was like Charlie Sheen stumbling from the jungle, wounded, inhuman somehow, unsure of what to do with what I had witnessed. War required a brutality that I couldn't muster, and I couldn't imagine you ever feeling.

You went back to your ROTC lessons, and I became inured to a dissonance—your sunny disposition and the ruthlessness your chosen career seemed to require. Platoon introduced to me images of what you could do and what you might experience, war scenes that I understood were possible but couldn't reconcile with who I knew you to be: kind, gentle, generous to a fault. I knew I would never fully understand, and so I accepted the inconsistency, waited for you to show me how the variables—you and the Army—created a solvable equation, as you practiced hand-to-hand combat and learned to shoot. My work was different than yours.

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I never expected to be an Army wife. I never expected us to stay together after college graduation. In the last month of our senior year, when you turned to me and asked, *Should I join?* I gave you the most honest answer I could. I told you to think about what you might

regret. You chose the Army over a graduate degree in mathematics. There's no way to know if that was a good choice, if avoiding regret is a good measure.

Two weeks later, moments after you were commissioned and the day before we both graduated, you posed for pictures with your father—you in dress greens and regulation-height pumps, he in his dress blues—and I watched from behind the camera. We stood in the May air, three years after consummating our secret love, thinking we were facing the reality of our choices and our fate. You were so happy to please your father, to follow in his footsteps as a commissioned officer. You wanted desperately for him to be proud of you. Maybe you knew how much you had already disappointed him, leaving little clues about our love, and how that disappointment would lay in a thick and heavy smear across the next four years, even before he asked, tearfully, why you rejected men. But this moment, captured in photographs, was a happy time for you. I was fearful. You were no longer playing soldier. You were one.

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I began my education in war that fall, when you went to Officer Basic Course at Ft. Eustis and I helped you study for your tests. I learned that hydrogen cyanide gas smells like almonds and mustard gas like garlic. I learned that each platoon has a designated chemical warfare tester, a soldier who acts as a canary in a coal mine. We argued about the ethics of this practice, and you reminded me that one death is preferable to many. That is true, I thought. But what if that one death is you? One of your instructors spent his years in Vietnam collecting dead, American bodies from the jungle. He was intent on imparting the seriousness of what you were getting into. My imagination played movie clips of the second-hand stories you told me, and those images follow me like a caustic mist.

It had been more than fifteen years since the Vietnam War ended. You and I had become adults in that time—a period of relative peace, of tearing down walls, of ending Apartheid, of economic growth—but because of you I was skin close to war's gut-churning grief and anxiety. Because of your gender, you could not sign up for combat, so you joined the Army's transportation corps, learning to lead soldiers in convoys and unload cavernous Navy ships carrying the supplies of battle. You were preparing for an ancillary role, one close enough to combat to receive danger pay. We had no idea how long the Gulf War would last,

whether you would finish your training in time to ship off. But this war was short, a reprieve we silently celebrated.

Three years after you graduated from OBC, you did leave for a war masked as a peacekeeping mission. After losing his impetuous battle that would have let you serve openly, a victory that would have made me visible, President Clinton sent you to Somalia, where you were a platoon leader, the officer in charge of security on the Port of Mogadishu. I didn't even know which side of the continent Somalia was on.

Before this, I thought you were safe. I thought your gender would keep you from harm. I thought this liberal president would keep our country out of conflicts. I thought you had skirted danger. And so we smoked and talked and planned for hours on our patio. In the darkness, we interlocked our fingers between the chairs. In our other hands, cigarettes glowed hot and red as the fear pulsing through our veins.

You arrived in Mogadishu at the end of July, almost two months after twenty-four UN soldiers from Pakistan were killed in an ambush by the Somalia National Alliance. In response, the military unleashed airstrikes, pummeling Mogadishu and the surrounding area. The port was still on high alert, carefully screening each Somali who entered the gates. Watching the black-as-tar men in skirts walking across the asphalt holding hands, your soldiers learned the Somali word for faggot. They shouted it from the guard towers. You didn't tell them to stop.

You learned to say *waan ku jeclahay, naag*: I love you, woman.

You called me every single day from a satellite phone in the operations office. This was illegal, of course, but you didn't care. The line was probably tapped, but we soon abandoned my masculinized code name, speaking openly and freely. You needed to connect with me, and I was glad for that. No news was bad news. Sometimes you told me funny stories, and sometimes I could hear people joking around in the background. You said you were losing weight because of the diarrhea and that the Somali women were beautiful. You didn't tell me about anything dangerous, not at first. There were things you couldn't say and things you didn't want to say.

On August 8, four US Army military police were killed, when a command-detonated landmine exploded under their vehicle.

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On August 19, you called me at 5:00 AM, before my alarm went off. You told me not to worry; you were safe. On a convoy across the city to headquarters to get the mail, your truck was hit by a command-detonated landmine. The blast clipped the front of your vehicle, sending it into the air and landing on the other side of a massive crater. Sniper fire followed. When it was all over, everyone was safe—except for a couple broken bones and shrapnel wounds. You called from the medical center. Your parents, who lived one town over, got a different call, an official one from the Army.

That day, the news hit national and our local media, and the next morning, your high school senior photograph, provided by your parents, was on the front page of the *Daily Press*. I would have given them a candid shot: you in your camouflage uniform, leaning forward with your elbows on your knees, staring directly into the camera, smiling. Instead, you wore a classic black drape and delicate, opal earrings, your eyes focused up and to the left, as if looking to heaven. I came home from school that afternoon to find messages from friends, telling me in frantic voices that the photo made them think you were dead.

The newspapers and television stations didn't call me, but your parents did interviews. Days later, they were on the front page, talking about the family's military tradition, telling the world that they were proud of you. Then they were on the six o'clock news, being interviewed from their living room. Your father said that women should serve in support roles, like yours, but not in combat. He didn't seem to understand that all of Mogadishu was a combat zone.

I pulled into the nucleus of our small community and waited to hear that you'd be coming home. Besides cuts on your face and arms, you were not injured. The Army gave you a Purple Heart and made you stay. Over the next year, the hearing in your left ear would deteriorate.

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The night of October 3 in Mogadishu was a gorgeous, sunny Sunday for me. You were shrouded in darkness, and all hell was breaking loose. Two Black Hawk helicopters had been shot down in the middle of the city and the port was receiving fire. You described the scene to me: helicopters flew low and loud, and bomb tracers looked like fireworks streaming across the black sky. I imagined you in a messy military office, looking through a giant window into the abyss.

We talked for an hour—me, curled up on the sofa, the first piece of furniture we bought together—as the battle raged around you. I don't remember being afraid. If you could talk, you were OK. But then you told me to hold on. You said you needed to give your rifle strap to your buddy, because she had used hers as a tourniquet earlier. *Don't you need it?* I asked shakily. The scene was suddenly less like an Independence Day celebration; the bomb tracers weren't fireworks at all. But I couldn't let the enormity of your situation sink in. I couldn't think you were in danger—even after the landmine. My only protection was knowing that you would come home alive. My mode of survival was to disconnect from reality, to acknowledge and then dismiss the danger reaching out to us.

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In mid-October, I planned to fill our front garden with purple and yellow pansies. In our mild Mid-Atlantic weather, they would last through the winter and spring, for your inevitable homecoming. I consulted friends and books. I chose a local gardening supply center forty-five minutes from our house. I'd never spent money on such an extravagance, and I was nervous I would fail, waste my resources.

On a Saturday, I bought bags of fresh soil, fertilizer, four flats of pansies and six pots of purple cabbage. I upgraded our second- hand water hose and sprayer. I bought a wide-tooth rake and a shovel to mix the hard clay with store-bought soil. After preparing the ground, I spaced the plants carefully, measuring their depth based on the experts I had consulted—regimented rows of baby pansies and cabbage interwoven with rich brown earth. Then I picked off each pansy blossom, one by one. I wanted the plants to send energy to the roots, so that they would grow strong and spread into a lush mass of leaves and flowers.

For weeks, I watered daily, added fertilizer, and broke off new buds. The stems and leaves grew, filling the bed. In mid-November, I stopped deadheading the plants, letting them bloom. The result was exactly as I had planned. A subtle welcome home for you, in the colors of our university, a way of saying, *You are not in Africa anymore.* Our own victory garden.

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You came home three days before Christmas. Your father, the retired Air Force colonel, arranged to meet your plane at Langley Air Force base, with your mother and older brother.

Your mother told me this on the phone, days before your arrival, but she didn't invite me. I invited myself by asking when I should be at their house. The event was for *family only*, your mother said. I called them back after hanging up, after pacing in our tiny dining room for ten minutes, talking myself into asking for what I deserved. Your father answered the phone, and I told him they were being unfair. I said that you would want me to be there. He stuttered, stalled, eventually got the words out: I was not welcome. I pushed harder. He didn't budge, and I finally relented.

The next day, I wrote your parents' names on two fat strips of masking tape and affixed them to the bottoms of my shoes. I stomped through my classes in order to hold back the tears, letting my fists uncoil.

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Your plane landed as scheduled before dawn. You and your soldiers walked down the stairs into the darkness. Your mother, father, and brother hugged you, ate pizza with you, and talked to more reporters. Then they got back in your father's Cadillac to drive the mile home. You got on a bus and rode to the Army base.

I followed the directions you gave me for where you would be dropped off. The lights of the squat, cement building streamed into the night. People were everywhere—wives, children, parents, and soldiers. Men in flannel shirts and blue jeans hoisted television cameras onto their shoulders, pointing them at crisply dressed reporters holding microphones. Children wore their Sunday best. Parents held signs emblazoned with their sons' and daughters' names. The atmosphere was of quiet celebration. These were experienced military families in a military town. They, like me, were bracing themselves for the person who would reenter their lives.

I was alone. No one, not a soul, spoke to me while I waited on the curb, back far enough from where the bus would park and release its passengers.

When the bus arrived, the news people rushed to the door, flipping on spotlights for live and recorded shots of the homecoming. There was a cheer and then things got quiet. The families, including me, stayed back. One by one, the soldiers, with their sand-colored uniforms tucked into jungle boots and sleeves rolled up, stepped down from the bus to the asphalt road. The bright camera lights forced their open pupils to dilate quickly, painfully. The trip home

had taken more than a day, but no amount of time could fully prepare them for the jolt of winter or the faces of their families. Each time a soldier's feet landed on firm ground, a family celebrated, while he looked out into the bright lights of the cameras, searching for his people.

You were one of the last to disembark. I remember that you were so tiny, a foot shorter than everyone else, your uniform hanging on you like sagging skin. Mostly, I remember your eyes, which were so much bluer than I'd recalled—your sunburned cheeks, a contrast I didn't expect. Everything but your eyes seemed out of focus to me.

We hugged briefly on that curb, and then you went inside the little building with news reporters. You did a few short interviews— local girl survives landmine blast, stays in combat, and then comes home. You were in Army officer mode, and your responses came easily. I don't remember seeing the film on air.

Families left, one by one, with their soldiers in tow, looking forward to and, I imagined, for some also dreading a few weeks of rest and relaxation. After you finished with your interviews, you joined me outside again. You lit a Salem and offered me one. I had quit again back in August, before I started the school year, and so I refused. I never liked menthols anyway.

The sky had lightened considerably, despite clouds fat with rain. By the time we got to Shoney's for breakfast, the rest of the world had awakened. We ate in a two-person booth among shipyard workers—passing in the morning, from night to day shift.

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My war education continued for months, years, even after you left the Army. I knew you would be different. I had a sense of the effects of trauma; in preparation for your homecoming, I had learned a bit about PTSD. I expected the nightmares. I expected you to sleep for dozens of hours at a time and then stay awake for dozens more. I expected you to tell me that you couldn't, didn't want to talk.

I became a canyon, echoing your words and actions—softer, more gently—bringing them into the hot sun so that you could bear witness to who you were then. I became attuned to subtle shifts in the air around you. I watched for your wandering thoughts, a glint of light that caught your eye, the sharp sound of a backfiring car. I held you while you sobbed in fear. I washed sweat-soaked sheets. I left the knife under your driver's seat, afraid of how your eyes

might turn wild with panic if I acknowledged it. You had become paranoid and somehow invincible; you believed you were in harms way and that you could ward off danger wielding a blade.

Most of you was the same, intact. A doctor discovered the piece of shrapnel lodged in your ear, a little pearl crafted from layers and layers of scar tissue. He removed it, and your hearing was instantly restored. You drove home gripping the steering wheel in terror, as 18-wheeler trucks screamed by your open window.

We moved together more slowly, sat in silence more often. We avoided the din of large crowds and came home early after outings with friends. You were both a wife and had a wife, and so we nurtured each other, but in the shadow of your trauma, I became smaller and smaller, putting your needs ahead of my own.

I was deeply afraid, which made me completely determined.

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There was no way to fully understand what could and would happen while you were gone, while you were there. Not just the diarrhea and landmines and rats and bullets, but the way those five months in 1993 rearranged us for the rest of our lives—me at home and invisible, you at war trying to be invisible. The way that half year changed you on a molecular level, made you different in ways we cannot comprehend even today, much less point at and say, *Yes, there. There is the evidence.* The transformation, my adaptation to your anxiety, was insidious, like a snake swallowing eggs from a bird's nest: quiet, clean, irrefutable but difficult to pull into focus.

I don't remember your leaving, but your absence carved a hollow space inside us, a space we are filling with a teaspoon. For the rest of our lives, you will be coming home.