

When Jordan got home from the war, I distinctly remember the smell of him, the smell of sand and blacktop and oil and human sweat. And when he kissed me, he tasted like blood and the end of a peanut butter and jelly MRE, which is what I imagine—and I can only imagine, after all—war tastes like, and it had permeated him so completely that he was no longer separate from it.

I remember the way he walked through the airport, his hands clasped tightly on his gear as if afraid someone was going to snatch it away from him, and how he always seemed to drift in front of me, preparing to take the brunt of some foreign and inconceivable explosion. I had to remind him, with a hand on his shoulder and with what I hoped was a both concerned and reassuring look that this was not Ramadi, and that I was not one of his soldiers.

I remember trying to drive and keep an eye on him, acutely aware of how jumpy he was, how every scrape of metal or sudden stop sent silent tremors through his body. Still he persisted, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine.

It was astounding to me, in those first weeks, the nightmares, the terror in his eyes upon waking, the strange, methodical way he did things now. I had never seen him like this before, I had never seen him counting the steps of his morning routine, never seen him count the stairs as he climbed them. Once, I heard him quietly numbering the strokes of his toothbrush, and I sat up in bed, listening to the methodical twenty-one, two, three, four, five...

Is he staying with you? My mother asked lowly.

In the spare room.

Liza...

Thirty, thirty-one, two, three, four, five...

One morning, about a week after his return, I found him standing in the kitchen, his hands planted on the counter and staring into the space above the island, breathing in and out, in and out, in and out. I knew better than to ask him what was wrong, I knew better than to assume I could help him. He wasn't here, not really, and when he returned from wherever he was, I wouldn't be able to offer him anything. He'd fetch the scotch himself.

I remember driving to the doctor's, rolling the list of questions in my head. What can I do? What am I allowed to do? Is there anything I can do? Why won't he talk to me? How long before he snaps out of this? And then I remember the concerned look on Dr. Navarro's face, because I didn't understand, and I wouldn't understand, because Jordan and I had become two competing kinds of crazy.

And I remember when Jordan asked me to marry him, because we were standing in Arlington Cemetery, about to meet with the rest of his surviving platoon at the Unknown Solider. He just looked at me, looked at me and pressed the ring into my hand.

I didn't know then, that he had bought it even before deployment, that he had carried it those three years, sometimes in his pocket, sometimes tucked around his pinky, the diamond imprinting itself into his palm, sometimes in his mouth until the metallic taste of it gave way to citrus and sea salt. I didn't know that he had slept with it on the same chain as his dogtags, as if that would be as signifying of his identity.

And he still tasted like war when he kissed me and then led me up the familiar path to the Tomb. Lee Carter, Jacob Pelham, Percy Holt, Kurt Hanley, Ben Redford, and Grant Kellicks. With Jordan, seven survivors.

They greeted each other like warriors, holding each other for a moment, and then hugging me gently, with familiarity but awareness of me being Jordan's. I knew their faces from picture after picture, but they looked almost less human now, awkward and stiff in their dress blues. And, I guess, I met them on the day of their deployment, when they gathered in the airport, those three long years ago.

We stood for a moment at the head of the crypt, but it wasn't inspiring the feelings of camaraderie Jordan had expected. Our—their—dead were known, and interred in fresh graves somewhere on the grounds.

I don't remember much else, except that it started to rain, finally, and Jordan took my hand and led me back down the walk to our car.

I remember what my mother said when I called her later that day and told her that he had proposed

Of course he did, she said flatly.

And I remember wondering what she meant by that, and now knowing that she meant it was part of Jordan's process. If he hadn't gone, we'd have been married by now anyway, and wasn't it better to pretend the war hadn't happened? No, it wasn't better. Because it had happened, and what they showed on television was not what really happened and no one televised the moments when Jordan just sat, staring, like that morning in the kitchen.

Now I know he was replaying things in his head, living again in his memories because he could not yet live in the present.

But then I could only guess that he was floating off somewhere more important or more pressing than now.