

Homecoming

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It was a scorching Sunday at the end of September when I stood in the parking lot of the Yankton Armory among a cluster of family: my parents, my son, my in-laws, my brother and his family. At home, we all lived in a tight circle of extended family, most of us in a forty-mile radius of Bryant, but that day, we gathered as part of a larger family unit – Yankton’s Battery C, 1st Battalion, 147th Field Artillery – itself much like one immediate family within the still larger, extended family of the South Dakota Army National Guard. Our group might have been the in-laws, connected, but on the periphery, because Blake was attached to the unit only for deployment. He’d never done weekend drills with these soldiers, and though I’d received notice of Family Readiness events in Yankton throughout the deployment, I’d never attended. We were separated from this family by a hundred and fifty miles, connected to them by deployment and now homecoming. Each report – “They’ve landed in Sioux Falls.” “They’re on the interstate.” “Less than thirty miles away.” – teased us with the possibility of tension relieved.

With George perched on my hip, his cheeks flushed deep pink, I bounced on the balls of my feet, regretting the heeled boots I’d worn in hopes that they might make me look slimmer, more like I had pre-deployment, pre-baby, more like the girl Blake had fallen in love with. I straightened my posture and sucked in my stomach. My own cheeks flushed as I anticipated reconnecting with the shy

athlete I fell in love with, welcoming home my soldier, and watching him transform into loving husband and father.

My eyes, thirsty for the sight of him, scanned the horizon. Heat radiated from pavement, blurring white highway lines. I nuzzled George’s cheek, whispering, “Daddy will be here any minute. Your daddy’s almost home!”

Of course, I knew that George couldn’t comprehend the words, in spite of my efforts to plant them in his vocabulary. After Blake’s two-week R&R, I had printed a picture of him, zooming in on our family photo from George’s baptism, blowing up Blake’s smiling face so large that the image came out grainy. I dangled it from a string of plastic rings on the handle of George’s car seat, so that he would see it wherever we went. I’d filled a padded plastic book titled “Who loves baby?” with pictures of grandparents, uncles, cousins, and that same family photo, full frame. When we flipped through the book, I paused dramatically before the last page, then turned it and exclaimed, “Daddy!” with a burst of excitement that I hoped was endearing, not jack-in-the-box frightening. George heard the word enough to recognize it, but I knew there was a possibility that he would be scared of his dad. He was a cautious child. When encountering strangers, he studied their expressions and my reactions, his brow furrowed, sometimes for twenty minutes before he relaxed into a smile. But George had always connected with my dad, Blake’s dad, and Blake’s brothers, reaching for their stubbled faces and questioning them with raised eyebrows, and I hoped this prepared him to welcome another deep-voiced man into his life. So, as we waited, I repeated the

words, the names for this man George was about to meet, priming him. “Almost home, George – dad’s almost here.”

A buzzing swelled amidst the crowd as a caravan of vehicles came into view, a dotted line growing on the horizon. I squeezed George and rubbed my hand frenetically over his back. I pointed and whispered, “There he is!”

George’s gaze followed my outstretched hand. Seeing nothing but a crowd of strangers, he leaned into me. I bobbed him gently, kissed his warm cheek.

When the trio of gleaming black busses pulled into the parking lot, forming a barricade between us and the highway, cheers erupted. The busses, with pastel banners painted along their sides, looked like the ones I’d ridden when I’d toured Mexican beaches and mountain villages – simple charter busses, not the Humvees and artillery trucks I’d envisioned. When a door coughed open and the first uniformed man descended the stairs, expectations scattered. Chaos ensued.

Families rushed forward. Stairs rattled as soldier after soldier stepped down. Each of them looked different – a sharp-chinned teenager, a flat face perforated with narrow eyes, a round face framed by bushy brows – but the same, too – clean shaven, ears exposed beneath thin-billed, camo hats. But none looked like Blake. I panicked.

My scanning became frantic. I searched for his familiar, plump cheeks, cut deep with dimples, his narrow squinting eyes disappearing in a smile. I wondered, had Blake shaved the mustache his buddies had goaded him into growing? Had he lost even more weight than when he was home for R&R eight months earlier? Was everyone off the bus? Why couldn’t I find him?

My body tingled. I was failing.

This was supposed to be the magical part of our story. We should have been drawn together

through the crowd like magnets. Something was wrong. Without the sight of Blake to anchor my thoughts, my mind spiraled to the worst-possible, least likely, conclusion. *What if he’s not here?* A logical impossibility. They hadn’t seen combat for weeks. There was de-mobilization in Kuwait, the checking of inventory, the change of command, overseas and cross-country travel. He had called to tell me when he’d arrive home. There was absolutely no way that Blake wasn’t there, but I couldn’t find him. Logic gave way to irrational certainty.

I reached across my body to hold George steady, pull him closer. My voice quivered, “Do you see your daddy?” I hunched my neck, lowering my forehead to meet George’s, and squinted to feign excitement. “He’s here somewhere, buddy. Lets’ go see.” I scanned the crowd again.

And then, through the flap of flags, glare of sun off busses, and circles of people holding tight to one another, I caught a glimpse of Blake – all cheeks and wide grin, eyes framed by smile lines – almost within reach. He walked in our direction, infuriatingly patient, as always.

I couldn’t wait. I wedged my right shoulder between bodies, shielding George from the crowd, as I angled my way toward him. I cast my hand up over a barrier of strangers and let it fall, catching the base of Blake’s clean-shaven chin. I reeled him in.

Bodies pushed and pulled around us, so when the crowd parted slightly, my feet stuttered, and I collapsed into Blake, who steadied me. His hands clasped tightly behind my back, like our first dance, our first kiss under a cottonwood tree. My forehead met his smooth cheek. I could feel his smile.

With George sandwiched in between, our bodies fit together. Blake pulled back, peering over his wire-rimmed frames at George, presenting a thin finger, which George clasped with his chubby

hand. "Nice to meet you, young man," Blake cooed. George responded with a tired, heat-glazed stare, but he didn't pull away. I rested my head on Blake's shoulder, absorbing the radiance of the moment, as he grinned. "Yes, it's very nice to meet you."

We made our way back to the cluster of family, where midwestern men who never hugged, hugged, arms clapping around backs. Blake's grandparents waited their turn, grandmothers first, balancing on tip toes as they reached up to embrace him. Grandpas, next, clasped hands and patted his shoulder before, finally, a brief embrace. My mom offered a side hug, my niece a timid leaning hug from her place in my dad's arms. My dad reached out his hand, said, "Good to have you home."

At the center of our circle, George, dressed in copper canvas overalls that I'd chosen because they reminded me of the Carhartts Blake wore for hunting, extended a hand to his dad, offering the stuffed baseball he'd held all morning. When Blake smiled and reached out, George's chubby fingers unclenched, dropping the ball. He raised his eyebrows and gasped, "Uh oh," Blake peered over his glasses, eyes wide with exaggerated surprise. He leaned close to George, and teased, "All gone." Then, he stooped to pick up the ball. When Blake stood, red-stitched leather in hand, exclaiming, "There it is!" George reached for him. The game of disappearing and reappearing seemed apt.

As the game gave way to small talk, Blake held George out in front of him, testing his weight. Turning to me, he asked, "What is he, about 20 pounds?"

"Nineteen and a half," I teased. "He was just at the doctor last week." I smiled at Blake's accuracy, a sure sign that he was tuned-in, ready for fatherhood.

Ready as we were to move on to family life and home, military ceremony held us in place. After a parade through Yankton, we arrived at the auditorium for a deactivation ceremony — our final obligation. As we made our way into the building, voices and bodies ricocheted off cinderblock walls. I moved sideways through the crowd, clinging to Blake to avoid being swallowed up in the euphoric sea of friends and family. Between bodies, I glimpsed a display of helmets, rifles, and boots. In our frenzied shuffle, I hurried past without registering meaning, but the image etched itself in my mind, solid and significant.

Inside, bleachers groaned beneath the weight of a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Blake led us to a row of folding chairs, where he sat down, perching George on his lap. As sweat trickled down my back, I slipped an arm behind him, resting it on the cool metal back of his chair. Bodies filled seats around us.

When voices hushed, I lifted my gaze to the stage set up a few rows ahead of us, expecting to see a speaker at the podium. I was surprised to find the stage still empty. Then the legs of a folding chair screeched behind us. I startled. When I heard what sounded like a muffled yell, I kept my head tuned forward, afraid to acknowledge the sound. The auditorium grew still. When another shout broke the silence, I traced it to a man, standing at floor level in front of the stage, facing the crowd of uniformed soldiers. Another folding chair screeched, another voice called out, this time an audible, "Sir, yes sir." Then silence again.

The next time the voice ahead of me boomed, I recognized what he called out as a name. This time I anticipated a soldier's response, the silence that would follow. I settled into the cadence of this military roll call, noticing the character of

each soldier's response, some soft staccato, others booming vowels punctuated with a deep "Hoo-ah." The names didn't register, only pattern, sound. And then, suddenly, silence came in the wrong place.

A name called. No squeaking chair. No shouted response.

When the name was called a second time, I held my breath, hoping for an answer.

It didn't come.

I wondered what kind of trouble this soldier might be in, what the repercussions might be for skipping out on this ceremony. But then the roll call resumed, marching steadily, alphabetically, approaching Jensen. Blake slid George onto my lap. At the sound of his name, Blake responded firmly and stood at attention. I shifted George's weight, allowing the heat of his body and the rhythm of ceremony to lull me into what felt almost like sleep. Until the pattern was broken again.

Name.

No response.

Silence.

Repeat.

This time, the silence created space for understanding, connecting with the image of helmets, boots, and rifles in the hallway. The soldier's cross. I realized there would be two more names called with no response. These were the names of men who could not answer.

Daniel Chuka, Allan Kokesh, Richard Schild, Gregory Wagner.

Casualties of war. My jaw clenched, tears collected, as I confronted the shameful privilege of forgetting.

As the roll call ended and the soldiers around us took their seats, Blake lifted George from my lap. Exhausted, I let my gaze fall, landing on the

eyeleted bottom half of Blake's bootlaces, following them up to the hooked upper half. I imagined families who longed for soldiers' boots to be filled. I imagined the parade that should have welcomed home their sons, husbands, fathers winding past their houses. I wondered what this day felt like for them, if they stepped out into their yards, if they could bring themselves to be happy for us.

I glanced up to find George – cheeks red, mouth relaxed, eyelids heavy – slouched into his father. Blake stroked the side of his cleanly shaven chin against the hot, damp, hair of his sleeping son. A relieved sigh relaxed my shoulders and rounded my back as I realized, those families would want this for us.

I closed my eyes and leaned into Blake, fitting my head into the hollow crook of his neck. I slowed my anxious breathing to match the steady rhythm of his breaths.