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An American and a Half in a Tower

When I was a kid, my mother took me to an Army surplus store and bought me a canteen and the belt that goes with it. For one summer, I carried that canteen around everywhere. It was strapped to my waist as I rode my first dirt bike and hit a curb, smashing my front teeth. My big sister poured water from the canteen onto my bloody face, trying to stop my screaming.

Later that summer, I carried the canteen to Vacation Bible School; all the kids liked it, but by then, it was dirty and I was getting bored with it. So, at the end of VBS, a kid traded me the canteen and belt for a folding buck knife and I decided to stop playing Army. For ten years I didn't play Army, and then, I picked up a canteen and belt again. This time, I wore them over brown and green camouflage, instead of blue and dirty denim.

When I joined the military, the only thing I knew was how to keep my canteen cool, because I had done it during that summer, ten years before. It takes two steps: First, you wet the cover in water, and then, you put the canteen in the cover. That's all I knew about the Army, though. Not much else. Other seventeen-year-olds who joined had been grooming themselves for years, but not me. The Army existed for only one summer when I was seven and then not at all for ten years and then it suddenly started again, preparing me to go to war. Ten years after that, the war ended. I stopped being in the war, anyway. Iraq was done for me. I spent ten years preparing and waiting and sitting for the war and then the war happens, which takes for-fucking-ever and then everything stops again.

There are real people in my year in Iraq, millions of them. Then the end of the war comes, abruptly, and that bothers me, because the stories of these people don't end. These are real and fictional as well, but all of it happened. The stories, the people, all of was no fucking joke. And it all took time, but not the same kind of time that existed outside of the war. The war took a lot

of time, maybe millions and millions of years, yet the three months after I got back were a flash. I returned from war and I was out of the Army in three months. It took three months, but that three months was spent in one second of medical exams and sitting in waiting rooms watching TV.

Then there was the time before the war: the nine years I spent in the Army preparing for Iraq that took a very short time too: maybe three seconds. And the time in between is Iraq. This time, the time between the preparation and the return, was the time that exists in millions of stories. It was the time in between, stopped in time, like a picture of a hummingbird. I read once that hummingbirds can flap their wings at something like 70 beats per second, and, if that is the case, how do we take still pictures of them? The answer: time slows down. I think that must have happened to me: Time slowed down. I was the bird.

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I came back from war on a flight that showed the movie *50 First Dates*. That's when the moment of the war stopped. That movie, like the war, is so joyful and so miserable at the same exact time. At the end of the movie, a guy plays "Somewhere over the Rainbow" on a ukulele. He paints this song with a super high voice makes me want to cry because it is vomiting happiness and sorrow all over the plane. The crush that I have on that song and the crush I have on the war exist for me in a moment of time that goes on forever. The story that takes place in the movie *50 First Dates* never ends. When the movie ends, Drew Barrymore is standing on the deck of a ship in the middle of fucking Alaska, wondering how the hell she got there and wondering who the hell the people are around her. She is okay and safe, but her story never ends because she is always living in the middle of it. That is the war. Sometimes, I wake up and I look around my comfortable house and I see that I am there, but I am not really there because I am still in the middle of my war story. I see my wife, Daley, and she kisses me and asks me what I want for breakfast, but she is not really there either. She is really on some boat in fucking Alaska and I am still in Iraq.

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There are the stories about the middle, the forever-time, like this one: a guy, just back from all night guard duty, forgets

to clear his weapon and it discharges when he jumps down from the HMMWV. I was outside smoking a cigarette and the sun was coming up when I heard three quick Tat-tat-tats, noisy in the desert, so I turned and heard Ortiz:

“Aww, mother fucker,” he said. I walked out to him. “Sergeant Steel, man, I didn’t mean to do that shit. I had no idea it wasn’t cleared.”

“I know, Ortiz. Let’s go see Sergeant Milosz.”

We went to go see our platoon sergeant. He explained that no one had heard anything, so why worry? He told me that, to everyone on base and in my unit, even me, though I was outside to hear it, it never happened. That same day, however, a woman, just back from guard duty, undressed, and took a shower. On her way back from taking a shower, she did not pull her hair up. She got an Article 15. That is war-time justice.

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Sometimes, I think there is more in the stories, and I try to get something deeper from the war, like some pun with a double significance, not just one huge ending where I die and people get screwed. Sometimes I try to figure out what it all meant, like one time, when Sergeant Sandra Plath and I were on guard. She hated being on guard. She hated the war. She hated the Army, even more than I did. She hated Army guys. She used to say that they were perverts. But she didn’t hate me; she told me that I got her: it was our mutual hatred of the sand and government. We made up parodies together. She would sing these songs so completely at the top of her voice because we were a mile out on guard. Once she got singing, there was no stopping her: How sweet it is to be fucked by you, Uncle Sammy! Sing it with me, Sergeant Steel! And we would sing together. And then, after singing, we would go our separate ways and she would still sing, and she would take a shower and let her hair down and get in trouble. And die. No punch line there.

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On an evening in April, I go for a run. This evening is hot and dry, and the wind is blowing. It feels like God put a huge blow dryer in my face. And still I run. I reach the end of the road and follow the dirt path to the left, the direction away from the main convoy gate. It is hot. It is hot and dust is in the wind like

a super-duper song. And I am singing to myself, which helps keep me occupied. I am singing Simon and Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence." I like to sing about how the song says the silence grows, like the road beneath my feet grows, like the war grows. Almost like a riddle, or a stupid joke. In this way, I can pretend the war means more, and it has something deeper to tell me. I know it's not true, but I sing and ponder anyway.

On this day, I can smell the sweet scent of the gray water dump to my right. It smells like old starch and older shirts. I remember looking at the water dump and then looking past the water dump, to the sun. There is nothing like a desert sunset. There is the blue of the sky and then the sudden orange. The dust in the air turns everything brown and tan like the color of the beach in the Pacific Northwest near Seaside. The sky has a downy texture too, just like the sand near the ocean. I want to reach and grab the sky and let it slide through my fingers and get it stuck in my fingernails. All that beauty. It's not fair to the poor fuckers getting killed out there. All that beach-fire that sets in deep oranges and lighter shades of beige in the dusty war-sky.

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It is April and I am not off base. It is April and I am not on the streets of Ar Ramadi. Rather, I am here, running. It's been about nine months, I think, that I have been here. It is hard to tell time, because one day stretches into the next with no sense of timing. I know that some things have happened though, and some others are yet to happen. We had Hot Gun for two months. Nothing happened. We had guard for two months. Nothing happened. We had patrols for two months. Then something happened: the shit flew, full force, into a hot desert whirlwind of a fan. Then we had more patrols and now this. Those events, two months at a time, help keep me time-oriented. That, combined with the heat, helps me to know the time of year. Fucking sweltering hot. No more muddy winter roads. It hasn't rained in a month. There have been storms, though. Ungodly storms. Storms that raise the temperature from 70 to 100 in less than ten minutes. Storms that keep you pinned down on a bridge in the middle of Ar Ramadi, weighing down your equipment so it doesn't get sucked up by the sky and the sand.

All these things have happened in nine months, and, even

now, the stories are still continuing. I think I may just keep running. Up ahead, far ahead, and also to the right stand outlines of buildings. They are two stories and ten thousand dollars apiece. These guard towers cost so much money and they are not even air conditioned or heated or bullet-proof. I hate the sight of those guard towers. I hate the sight of their super-heated cinderblock walls. It's disgusting to me, so I do the honorable thing: I look down again at the road, away from it. I can see that my feet are still dusty brown, the same color as the moon-dirt on Planet Ramadi.

I look ahead now, and I know there is another silhouetted guard tower, but I am determined to keep my eyes on the ground a few feet in front of me to block out the sight of that place. (Like when someone tells you to not look down. What's the first thing that happens? You look down.) The beat of the song I am singing in my head helps, though. Every beat of the song is on my left foot, a little faster than I am used to, but this swiftness takes me away quicker. I love that. It takes me away.

From up ahead, I can hear a squad of soldiers coming; they are singing too, but they are singing about a little bird and wings torn off and how they smashed his fucking head. I yell to them, because don't they fucking know they aren't supposed to kill mockingbirds? Assholes. To me, this is over the top. I can handle the "kill the enemy" cadences because in war, it is somewhat expected that one should dehumanize one's enemies. Wrong, but almost understandable. It is the same with the cadences that dehumanize sex and women. These guys are walking dicks, and they don't encourage anything like sensitivity towards the opposite gender. Sexual assault and racism: the diet of a warrior. But for the life of me, I can't understand the violence towards kids. I don't get it when a soldier throws rocks at kids. But they do. When soldiers get ready to go on patrol, it is just known that it is the gunner's job to get stones. If the kids come asking for *schocalaté*, the gunner lets loose. One person even told me this: "Kids are the meanest people there are." I can't see how someone might think that. Kids don't talk about killing birds and killing ragheads and raping women. When I was in Iraq, the kids I met while I was there liked to play tic-tac-toe in the dirt with me, until they got blown up. They

enjoyed being spun in the air, a lot like American kids. They did not enjoy getting hit in the head with rocks. And yet, many Americans did this to them. Sometimes, I wonder if the orders we were given were in a list, like this:

- Invade country.
- Set up camp.
- Hit kids in head with rocks.

It is not far from this to something like Abu Ghraib. The difference, I think, is the soldiers in Abu Ghraib got caught. The soldiers who throw rocks never will. That's the big fucking joke. I can't understand it when we talk about killing kids and birds and things that would never ever harm anything else.

Maybe I'm wrong, though. Maybe the only way through the war is to kill. Maybe we have to hate so that the bad stories don't affect us. I know soldiers kill for lots of reasons. Sometimes, they kill because they are just bored. Sometimes, they kill because this war thing is much more than they thought it was going to be. They kill because the joke is this: War is no fucking joke. It's really a bullet in a guard tower and no one else there because they are sleeping.

Flash forward: I go home. The war ends but I keep going. But the war keeps going. I know it keeps going because War Never Changes. Just one big punch line after another. And so I keep going too.

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Here is another story: I spent one morning with my platoon sergeant, and I was weeping. He talked to me that morning for a very long time. The conversation circled. We kept saying the same things:

“Quit being a pussy, Sergeant Steel,” he said to me.

I was still weeping. “There's everything, everything still on the ceiling of the tower, like Santa Claus nailed his red coat and brains to the roof. There are scattered fucking parts of her brain of the roof. Parts.”

“Be a man,” He says. “Be a real mother fucker. She did it to herself. She deserves it.”

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So the stories must keep going, otherwise people just don't get it. One final story:

I was on guard in the tower with Plath. We spent the day together, passing time by singing and cussing and talking about how much we both hated being there.

“I got in trouble last week, Sergeant Steel,” she said.

“You get busted?” She opened her flak vest and showed me the empty collar that her corporal rank used to sit on.

“I came out of the shower without my hair up. I got an Article-15 for it. They said it was distracting. I told my commander those guys shouldn’t be looking at my tits through my wet t-shirt anyway. He didn’t like that.”

“What a fucker.”

“Yeah. What a fucker. He told me I shouldn’t be fucking around with guys. He called my husband while I was standing in his office and told him that they caught me in the shower with some guy.”

“Did he get in trouble too?”

She looked at me and squinted her eyes. “For a nice guy, you sure are a jack-ass, Sergeant Steel.”

I looked away from her and down at my own feet. She saw me looking away from her so she continued. “Don’t worry, Sergeant Steel. I got this. I know what to do. You go downstairs and get some sleep. I’ll come and get you in a few hours.”

“You know, you don’t have to be weird about this,” I said. “We are the same, you and me.”

“I know, Sergeant Steel. I just want some time to think, I guess.”

“Okay,” I said. “Wake me up if you need anything.”

I walked out of the guard tower and down the stairs. I entered the room below and took off my vest to lie down. In my head, another song started. It might have been “Free Bird” or “Sound of Silence.” Whatever it was, I sang it, all the way through.

I can hear the final words of the song in my ears, just like Plath’s final words. She yells to me from the top floor of the guard tower, but I am still singing the end of the song, so I don’t move. She is yelling to me louder now, and so I decide to go upstairs. On the way out the door, I hear the shot crack like I popped my eardrums on a long plane ride.

Now, after the end of the war, I can hear no singing, but I finally get the big one: the big joke. I finally get the stupid punch line: Not enough time. It is a punch line, like the joke, like the ceiling, like the bird, like old Boo Radley. In my head, today, the jokes come faster. I see Plath, and I see everything. I see my platoon sergeant telling me to get myself together, that she was just some stupid girl, and I see the roof of the tower. I see the soldiers passing me, singing cadences about killing birds and throwing rocks. I see the sunset and the boat in Alaska and the moon-dirt. I see it all and it never fucking ends.