

Last Year

On December 21st, 2009, just shy of eight years after I left home in a hurry to join the U.S. Army, I am in the driver's seat, leaving an Army base in suburban Maryland, wearing my uniform for the last time.

"I know you're not going to miss it," my First Sergeant, a refrigerator of a man in army fatigues, told me just before I left. "A lot of guys do, but you've got some things going for you." It's one of the last things said to me in uniform, offered just before I step out into the winter air. This is my final commendation from a military leader.

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On December 22nd, 2010, just a year after my last day in the Army, the world's most powerful man pulls back a wooden chair and sits down at a desk on a stage decorated with the flags of each branch of service. The President is in a dark suit. A small American flag pin rests on his lapel. Behind him there is a small crowd of lawmakers also in dark suits, except for the women in bright colors, huddling in to be seen by the cameras. The Chairman of the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff neither smiles nor frowns as he stands in his Navy dress uniform. The Vice President grins his old man grin. The two former service members on stage are at the end of a tour of duty in which they have acted as the face of a law that said that those who love members of the same-sex were unfit to serve openly in the military.

The President, smiling, signs the paper on the desk, a bill transforms into law. They call it a repeal. We call it wrong made right. He signs it with two boxes full of pens, a strange standard

applied whenever new laws are signed, and when he is finished, he looks out at the crowd, smiling. He slaps his palm down at the table. “This is done.”

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In December 2009, I don’t come out of the closet. I should say, I don’t come *back* out of the closet. I was out at sixteen, but the aforementioned law pushed me into this strange sort of bullshitting for eight years in which many people seemed to assume I was queer, but in which I wasn’t allowed to say it. Or to hold hands. Or to go on dates anywhere near the bases where I was stationed. Or to visit the barracks rooms of other queer soldiers without the heart-thudding fear of being burst in on. I don’t come back out for two more months, despite being hired by the biggest gay and lesbian nonprofit organization in the country. I’m on separation leave, leave time spent at the end of my contract for the sake of making my last day of work arrive a few weeks earlier. This means that although I’m out of the Army, I’m still, technically, in the Army on paper.

For weeks after I take off the uniform, something keeps me in, keeps me silent. I have yet to escape a sense of duty about the Army, a sense of what I should and shouldn’t stand for as a representation of the modern soldier. It’s also fear that keeps me in. Irrational fear, really. Fear that I’ll lose my veterans benefits. Fear that I’ll be pulled back in. Fear related to years of hearing my peers and my bosses talk about how they’d kick a soldier’s ass, or worse, if they knew he was gay. I’ve yet to repair the injury caused by being fearful for years that I would, at best, be asked to leave, that I would be told that I don’t belong.

In December 2010, only a few people in my office know that I date women. I’ve been seeing the same woman for a few years now, but here in this gay office in D.C., everyone assumes I mean boyfriend or husband when I say ‘partner.’

When I came back out earlier this year, I did so in the most theatrical of ways. (Although it is hard to call it a coming out; No one suspected I was straight at that point.) The day I formally got out of the military, the day the ink dried, the day any real risk in doing so disappeared, gay blogs across the country shared a letter that I wrote to the President, calling for the end of the law called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” In the letter, I come out as bisexual again, and I brag about my silent service.

Honestly, at this point, I’m not sure that bisexual is the right word. There is this ongoing in-group conversation about the term reinforcing a gender binary, so queer, or pansexual might be better terms to describe me being into every gender. Because the letter is a rhetorical act, a marketing ploy aimed at a general audience, I keep it simple.

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In December 2009, before I go, I’m not exactly *passing* for heterosexual. In uniform I am not a towering presence. I have a slight lisp and overly-groomed eyebrows. I often forgo the required beret in my uniform because I don’t want to mess up my hair. I don’t hide that I’ve got a gay job lined up in D.C. In this hyper-masculine, heteronormative culture, I stand out.

I’m also the non-commissioned officer assigned to lecture my unit on the regulations regarding sexual harassment, equal opportunity and the current policy restricting open service for gay and lesbian troops in the military. This isn’t punishment or an inappropriate joke on the part of my bosses; I volunteered for this position.

The last presentation I gave on these subjects wasn’t much different from the rest. A few dozen troops in their uniforms packed into a classroom as I flipped through a slideshow presentation.

“The goal of the Army’s Equal Opportunity policy is to ensure fair treatment of all soldiers.” I tell them again, the same mandatory message they heard last quarter and the quarter before.

When the part on “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” comes up, I feel the room get quieter. I feel it as a stillness on my skin, as if these warriors were holding their breath. Or not. The truth is, very few soldiers really gave much consideration to the rule. Even in this conservative culture, most of the people who have work to do every day don’t seem to care anymore. It’s a non-issue nowadays. It is as likely as not that any tension in the air during these sessions was imagined by a soldier with a lot on his shoulders.

“There is no constitutional right to serve in the armed forces,” I tell them, reading from the slide. “The presence in the armed forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability.”

I don’t mind saying it. It’s not masochism; it’s relief of pressure, the chance to talk about it, the chance to speak.

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In December 2010, I am still keeping my hair short on the sides, although now I grow it into a wide, Mohawk-type mess on the top. I’m wearing dress shirts and ties for the first time in my life, but because this is a trendy, modern office (trendy for D.C., at least), I’m not in a suit. Jeans and a button-up aren’t out of place here. On Fridays, when it gets casual, I wear a t-shirt, which shows the collection of tattoos I amassed while serving.

Short sleeves in the office bring about another first – being considered butch.

“So you got all your tattoos when you were in the Army?” a member of the field team – the attractive guys and gals who go out to get petitions signed – asks me, as he leans onto my desk and lifts the sleeve of my shirt.

“I love guys with tattoos,” he says as he smiles before strutting away.

Here in this culture, where everyone is assumed gay first, my tattoos, my novice sense of style and my history in the military present me as almost a tough guy. A little bit butch. Probably a Top.

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In December 2009, I am a superhero.

When soldiers tell people, at least people who live on and around military bases, that they train dogs for the Army, there are only a few responses that they get.

That is so cool. Wow. How did you get into that? So you get to play with dogs every day?

When we’re hanging out in our office, with our dogs kenneled nearby, barking to each other, canine handlers pretend to complain, pretend as though we tire of this routine. We don’t. We love the vest with K-9 printed on the back that we wear over our fatigues. We love parking anywhere we please and keeping the oversize SUVs running because we have to keep our eyes on the dogs. We love wrapping our leashes around our shoulders, or letting them hang off of our belts, so that everyone can see them. We like silently encouraging people to ask.

It’s the attention. It’s the fact that we’re being zipped around the world to search for bombs, the fact that we’re rubbing elbows with Secret Service in NYC. This feels like rock star status. It’s among the reasons that so few handlers are in a rush to leave the military.

“What is it that you think you are you going to do when you get out?” The First Sergeant often asked soldiers to scare them from leaving.

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In December 2010, I am a lackey.

My boss is significantly more butch than I am. No, not butch – he wears polo shirts tight enough to cling to his chest and arms – but aggressive. From my cubicle outside of his office, I watch as my coworkers leave conversations with him muttering under their breath, almost crying sometimes. He doesn't budge. He gets his way.

“Listen, my friend.” One can tell he has distaste for someone when he calls them ‘friend.’ “That just isn't going to happen.”

My job, the job I left the Army for, the job for which I went to school at night while serving in K-9 units across the globe, is to keep him happy. Expense reports. Travel arrangements. Find him a place that ships suits. Call him a taxi.

“Anthony,” he calls from his desk, not bothering to stand. “How about a cupcake run?” Cupcakes for the whole office, on him. (Expensed to the organization, but at least it's him who asks me to make the order, to walk down to boutique bakery to pick up our treats).

And here's the thing, as much as this sounds like whining, I wear a genuine smile as I stand in the brightly lit bakery in Dupont Circle, the historically gay district of the city, in tight slacks and a shirt pinned closed with a skinny tie, balancing several bright pink boxes of 3-dollar-a-piece cupcakes to hand out to an office full of happy, queer professionals.

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In December 2009, I say K-9. I say SSD. SSG. LP/OP. QRF. We say FOB, even fobbit. K-pot. CAB. 550 cord. 9 mil. Downrange. FRAGO. XO. BOLO. IED. CBRN or NBC. RPG. Sham-shield. Stripes. NCOIC. MWR. MRE. DFAC. FTX. PX. M249 Getsome, Getsome.

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In December 2010, I say sexual orientation. I say LGBT. Try LGBTIQQAA2-S. I say HRC. NCTE. NCLR. HIV/AIDS. Whitman-Walker. Kinsey. Butler. Sexual orientation. Gender identity. Gender expression. Gender nonconforming. Second-parent adoption. Medical power-of-attorney. Civil Union. SSM. MSM. GLADD and single-D GLAD, NCOD, ENDA, DADT, DOMA. Repeal, Repeal.

In December 2009, Staff Sergeant Burrell, the married, straight soldier who presents the equal opportunity lectures with me, stands with me in uniform in the hallway of my unit headquarters before I walk out the door for the last time. Without any hush in his voice, he asks me the most personal question he is permitted to ask me.

“Do you think that they’ll repeal it within your lifetime?”

“My lifetime? Of course, two or three more year of this, tops.”

“I’m not so sure, there are plenty of old crusty types who are going to bitch about it.”

I nod. “Yeah, but it’s not them who gets to decide. This is going down. We’ve got a Democrat in the big house and a campaign promise.”

He lets a smirk creep out, not a mischievous one, not exactly. It is something closer to the smile of someone getting away with something, a whispered ask. “I half-hoped it would be repealed before you went.”

I blush. Despite his benign intent, despite my reemerging pride, I feel as though I am being accused of something. This should be the moment in which I come out, at least to a soldier I trust, when the stakes are low.

I don’t.

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In December 2010, I am sitting in meeting space on the first floor of building where I work in D.C. The space here is all glass and milky white surfaces, floor-to-ceiling windows, plenty of light.

Today there are rows of chairs and a projection screen set up for us, for those of us who aren't down the street watching firsthand the President sign this bill into law.

I've been misty-eyed all day. I could barely keep it together on the subway train in, so I know that I might lose it when the livestream starts. I sit in the back with a cup of coffee, my legs crossed as I lean forward at the edge of my seat. I've got a lot on my to-do list today: expense reports, blogs posts, a celebratory cupcake run, no doubt. Still, today they will cut me some slack. As the stream begins, we watch on the projectors as the camera scans the crowd. The gay congressman is there. There's the Arabic linguist who the Army asked to leave, and the pilot kicked out just before retirement. There's Eric, who lost his leg during the first push into Iraq.

"Hey Anthony," a blond coworker with a sweet face and kind, blue eyes sits down beside me in a T-shirt that reads REPEAL THE BAN. "Didn't you used to be in the military?"

"Yeah," I tell him, beginning to smile. "Used to."

Somewhere along the line, my feelings about queer folks serving in the military will get blurry. I'll start realizing how, even as it was a ladder out of poverty for me, I can't say whether I believe in what we were doing. Soon I'll recognize that, as many times as the U.S. military has been sent in to be the super heroes, some men in suits have sent us to do something ugly. Maybe it's the seemingly unending wars of the start of the 21st century, or maybe it's just me coming to terms with being had, being sold a narrative that's only half true, but the vision I have of my military service is starting to crack, and those cracks are starting to show.

I smile with some resignation, keeping my eyes on the screen as they well up. I smile with a small amount of embarrassment, with a small amount of pride. As the morning sun slips in through the window behind my seat, I smile, out of uniform.

“Thank you. Thank you,” the President begins. “Today is a good day.”