

Still at War

I put my hands up to my neck and tried to clear my throat. “Laryngitis,” I whispered into the video camera. “I can’t speak.” The man from the church, a guy named Bruce Beck, was interviewing us—interviewing my husband. Bruce was from the Bentley Springs Baptist Church and wanted to put together a human-interest article for their monthly e-newsletter and website. Most of the time, he told us, he wrote short pieces about Bible Study or the Joy Club or “Getting Ready for the Real Jesus.” But when he called to set up the interview, Bruce said he wanted to do a remembrance piece now that the war was nearly nine years old and almost over. “I don’t want to intrude on your husband’s privacy,” he said. “But people need to know about our heroes. They want to feel supportive.”

“You can ask,” I told him, “but I don’t know what kind of story you’ll get. Douglas doesn’t say much.”

Bruce Beck was a clean-shaven church man in a pressed shirt who seemed genuine in his concern. He spent almost four hours listening to Douglas and watching *Apocalypse Now*. Douglas wouldn’t shut up. I couldn’t believe it. He said more than he had in the four months since he returned home. I eavesdropped from the kitchen, made bologna sandwiches and served drinks,

but the voice I heard belonged to no one I knew, a stranger who spoke from my husband's body, referring to himself in a way I didn't recognize.

I had questions of my own. Before Douglas came home from Walter Reed, I went to the family advocacy briefing they gave for spouses and relatives. I raised my hand. But the advocacy woman droned on with her spiel about what we should expect our loved ones' state of mind to be when they came home. We were gathered in a cinderblock room in the hospital, a cold room with metal folding chairs and a podium at the front.

"Questions in a moment," the woman said and kept clicking through her PowerPoint presentation, something she had memorized, no doubt from countless times repeating it. I put my hand down. The woman next to me yawned and covered her mouth. She had round, thick wrists, with a child's hairband wrapped tight around the fat. A moment later, she nudged me with her elbow and pointed to a table on the other side of the room. There was a coffee urn and a tower of Styrofoam cups, a neatly displayed platter of flat, dry cookies. I wondered if the family services woman had gone to the trouble of arranging cookies in an elaborate effort to cheer us up. In the same cheery way, she was talking about our husbands, using terms that skirted around the fact that who we were getting back would probably not be the same men we'd been waiting for.

The speaker had an unfortunate haircut that made her look like Moe from the Three Stooges, a straight line of bangs that sliced across her forehead. As she talked, I tried to imagine a better hairstyle for her, something less severe. I was almost hoping Larry and Curly would burst into the room and interrupt the seriousness of what we were hearing. Instead, two psych

nurses joined the presentation and passed out cards with a list of “Symptoms to Watch out For.”

They said, “We understand your concern. We want to help if we can, but don’t call us unless it’s an emergency. Psychotic episodes are normal,” they said. “They’re not emergencies. Your husband might start drinking too much. Don’t call us about that either. Don’t call us unless he wakes you up in the middle of the night with his hands around your neck. Or with a knife at your throat. Or if you pass out. Something like that. That’s when you should call. But don’t call us unless that kind of thing happens. He’ll have flashbacks, that’s totally normal,” they said.

“I can’t listen to this,” the woman next to me leaned in and whispered. “I want a cookie.”

By the end of the presentation, my questions seemed irrelevant. I had wanted to know about depression if it came. I meant his, but in hindsight, I should’ve asked about my own.

“What has it been like to have your husband back?” Bruce asked me as I refreshed his iced tea. He was panning the video recorder toward me and probably had no idea how much effort I’d expended just to clean our apartment and make it seem normal. “I’m sure it’s been quite a reunion!” he said.

I pointed at my throat. “Beyond words,” I choked out hoarsely and I smiled. “I’m just happy he’s here.”

For the first few weeks after Douglas came home, I took time off from the custom upholstery shop where I’d gotten a job when I dropped out of college. I liked all the fabric patterns and colors; I liked recovering old pieces of furniture, and I was continually amazed how something torn and ratty could become a whole new furnishing with the right fabric. They were good to me at

the shop, even made a cake with red and blue frosting when Douglas came home. In the beginning, every couple of days it seemed, I'd call work and tell them Douglas needed care. I was his sole caregiver. And they'd say, "OK, we understand." Then I'd lie down on the sofa and watch TV all day, talk shows and soap operas. We could barely afford cable.

Douglas was quiet, but he liked me to stay in the same room as him. He'd say, "I'm glad you're here. I'm glad to see you." He was like a chiming clock; he'd say it almost every hour in the break between TV shows. He'd grab my hand and stroke it for a moment, then just as quickly he'd forget I was there. He slept in the recliner most of the time, and occasionally would wake up in the middle of the night and hobble in to bed, throw his crutches on the floor, but he was still uncomfortable about letting me touch him. I watched him carefully, but the psych nurses had said not to ask. Douglas talked in his sleep, though, and in the beginning I listened. I could only imagine what he saw.

"Shut the fuck up, man!" he'd say to his friends. "How are you?" It was how they talked to each other on the phone whenever one of his war buddies called. They laughed in a way that was dark.

His emails to me when he was deployed had been different, more like the Douglas I wanted to know. He'd write, "Hi my love." He'd tell me about the children that followed them everywhere. On one trip across the expanse of desert, he told me how children showed up, from God knew where, in their bare feet, dust blowing all over them. They were looking for food and water. Douglas said he and the other guys kept driving, but they were silent, not knowing how to feel. "I want to feed them," he wrote. "But what do I have? Sticks of gum. It's like passing out Band-Aids and saying, 'I'm sorry.'"

One afternoon a week after he came home, Douglas started screaming in his sleep and thrashing in the recliner. I realized

he was having a PTSD episode but my knowing it didn't stop it from happening. His arms cut through the air and he knocked the lamp off the table. It wasn't a great lamp, faux crystal that I got at the Goodwill, but it shattered. "Fuckin' towelhead!" he said. His words were unmistakable.

I bent down to pick up the broken shards of glass and I stared at him for a moment and saw someone I didn't like, a version of a man I might not have married. It was like suddenly realizing one day that you accidentally tied yourself to a stranger, maybe a tobacco-chewing hayseed who was as angry as he was skinny. What does that say about you? There were days I didn't want to be here, days I scolded myself for getting married too young, and other days I kicked myself for having these kinds of thoughts. I didn't tell anyone, certainly not my mother-in-law, who alternated between fits of crying and platitudes about how to "live and let live." It was her response to everything, as though the war would somehow stop if everyone just left everyone else alone. She'd gone off the deep end in some regards. "Don't worry. He will return to us," she told me on the phone one afternoon, as if, in fact, he had not already returned to us in this war-beaten package, one leg missing and a psyche that brewed storms.

I picked up those broken triangles of glass and tried to remember what Douglas looked like when we first met. He had been almost like a Boy Scout, I thought. Exceedingly polite and clean cut. He worked as a driver for a delivery express service and occasionally went away on weekends to the Army National Guard. I liked that steadiness. It's what I needed. But something had changed after he got called up. Life had cut an extra line in his face; there was a thickness in his brow, in his being, his eyes deep with an expression I couldn't read. I threw the shards of glass away and let Douglas sleep. Then I sat on the sofa and watched TV because I didn't know what else to do. It was like I was wounded too, missing something I couldn't name.

When we met, I was still in community college studying drama, trying to keep up, believing that when I graduated I would go somewhere. I pictured myself moving to the city, hanging around artists and the theater and having fun. Douglas said he liked this about me, my dreams, and also the way I forced myself to be spontaneous even when I was tired. That's how we got married: in a flash. We had been dating five months and our time together had felt unreal. When Douglas got called up, I flew out to Fort Irwin, where he was getting weapon training and learning new strangleholds and personal combat stuff even though he was in a transportation unit. We got our blood tests and went to a justice of the peace and that was it. We were married two days before he left. I wasn't even wearing the dress I'd always dreamed of; instead, a pair of jeans and flip-flops. Douglas was in his fatigues and smelled of sweat. It was a scent I used to love.

A friend of Doug's, Bunnie (who was killed a few months later), snapped a picture of us outside the courthouse and that same day we had two copies made. We went to one of those thirty-minute photo joints and spent the first afternoon of our married life at the mall waiting for our wedding picture so each of us would have a copy. I remember being chilled from the mall air conditioning and Douglas pacing outside the Rite Aid. It was like waiting for a tiny birth, developing film, evidence to both of us that this had really happened.

When Douglas was deployed, I spent hours with our wedding picture, wishing it was somehow deeper than the thin sheet of waxy paper on which it was printed. I felt like I did when I was a kid and wanted to get inside the television to be with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, only this time I wanted to crawl inside that photo, reach through a hole to the other side of the world to get a hug and a dusty kiss and see what he was seeing. On those occasions when Douglas called from his company's cell

phone, we'd get a couple of minutes with each other. Sometimes he'd talk in phrases I didn't understand but tried to memorize. He'd talk about IEDs and RPGs and patrolling the Celine Dion (Salah al-Din) mosque. It was all shorthand for war.

Douglas was speculating with Bruce about the money. The money he'd get from the government—that was his favorite topic. It was the only time he got excited, really animated and hopeful about the future. “What do you suppose they give for a leg? I know other guys who were in Walter Reed. They had missing fingers or half a liver gone or whatever, part of a stomach. What trumps a leg? Maybe blindness,” he said. It was like a game of wounded poker, injured man against injured man. All the guys in Ward 57, the amputee ward, had talked this way. “I'd like to get a motorcycle,” he told Bruce. “I've always wanted a Ducati.”

Bruce looked at me.

I shrugged. “It seems kind of pointless,” I whispered.

“No it doesn't!” Douglas said. “Not at all! It is not without its point.”

Sometimes I wondered if Douglas was really aware that he couldn't yet stand up without hopping in place and holding his arms out straight to get his balance.

“I'll get a Ducati and then we'll buy a place of our own,” he said. “And then we'll live off the rest.”

“Really?” said Bruce. “How much do you expect to get?”

“We're still waiting to find out,” I whispered. “I don't think it's much. The paperwork is tied up.”

“It will be *plenty!*” Douglas insisted. “The Army doesn't leave behind its fallen.”

“Right,” I whispered. He didn't know. It was me, not Douglas, who had been on the phone with the Army benefits people for the last three weeks trying to convince them he deserved full

disability. Full disability: that's what you wanted, that was the money hand in wounded poker. I coughed and tried to clear my throat. I looked over at Bruce, who was jotting something down.

I was embarrassed, afraid he would find out how we really lived. We were crowded in a small apartment with plain white walls that I tried to decorate with pictures I bought from a thrift store. They were pastels, the kind you see in doctors' offices. We had a ratty sofa that I covered with a sheet (I couldn't afford to reupholster my own furniture) and a powder-blue recliner for Doug. I'd draped the lampshades with scarves to hide the burn marks. Nothing matched but it was the best I could do, and I felt both proud of my efforts and ashamed. It was not what I wanted for my life.

I also didn't want Douglas to tell Bruce how we watched hour after hour of TV, how it carried us through the day. I didn't even read anymore. Instead, it was *Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*, and *Jerry Springer*, where at least all the freaks made us look normal for a while. There was a whole world full of crazies willing to parade on TV. It was reassuring that we were not alone, though I also felt embarrassed for us. Look what we had become: we ate Cheetos for breakfast, for Christ's sake. If Douglas wanted a Pepsi or a beer to wash them down at 9 a.m., I thought, Well, why not? He's injured. He deserves whatever he wants. The problem was the TV didn't stop. If it wasn't crappy game shows or soap operas, it was the news: the local and national broadcasts, even PBS. It was continual, always something else. But I couldn't turn it off because Douglas was tethered to it like it had become his prosthesis.

During commercial breaks, I tried to have conversations, but I didn't know what to say. "What was it like?" I asked once, but all Douglas told me was, "Believe me, you don't want to know." When I got home from work in the evenings I'd ask, "How are you feeling?" What I meant was, "Tell me anything, please."

Douglas would say, "I'm fine," or, "My leg hurts."

We answered questions, just not each other's. "What's an abolitionist?" I might answer Alex Trebek for a clue about twelve-letter words. Or Douglas would shout out, "The Crusades," before Vanna turned all the letters around, an answer I didn't suspect he even knew. Sometimes Douglas would ask, "Can you get me a beer, please?" but it wasn't a question of depth; it didn't mean anything beyond the fact that he was thirsty and felt helpless. I imagined maybe there was more behind it, things he'd never say: that he didn't want to seem like a burden, he didn't want to ask too much. How much is too much, I wonder? I didn't sign up for the Army, but look what I got.

I would never say this, though. I would never hold it against him. It's not his fault.

One evening on TV there was a commercial for a sports drink where a man in a wheelchair pushed himself around a racetrack, sweat pouring off his muscles. He was tanned and determined. The whole thing was meant to be inspiring but it seemed so unrealistic to me. What came before, I wanted to know. Did that guy in the wheelchair spend a year on the sofa, watching TV? I glanced over at Douglas, hoping he might get an idea, but he was asleep, reliving the war, or else dreaming about money the government was going to give him.

Bruce asked Douglas questions about desert geography while I stood quietly in the kitchen and stirred my iced tea. Bruce was one of those people who really supported the war, you could tell. I was relieved. I was afraid we had invited someone into the house who would ask questions like, did Douglas think it was worth it, his leg for oil, and so forth. They were too hard to think about, those things. Besides, if you're a family member, you've got to believe that what you're doing, giving up your loved one,

is the noble thing. It was what everyone told me. But sometimes an unrestrained thought would arise and I'd feel repulsed. My stomach would turn, almost like morning sickness, and I'd have to swallow the nausea. I could barely breathe. When these moods hit, it helped to be at work. I'd rip the fabric off of old chairs with my hands. I'd pull staples from the wooden frame with a mind for tearing something apart. I was learning how to sew kick pleats and tuck the extra fabric out of sight, but that's all I knew how to do. It was frustrating. One afternoon, I messed up several times on the same pleat and threw my pliers at the wall. I didn't mean to, but I'd put a small dent in the plaster. I spent the rest of the afternoon apologizing to my boss.

"Don't worry," he said like a command. He didn't say anything else. A couple days later, when I showed up for work, he had an American flag thumbtacked to the wall in the workshop. It covered the hole I'd made. My boss believed in the government the way some people believe in religion. It made it easier on me. I was glad that Bruce believed, too, because if he had questioned us too deeply, I don't know what I could've said.

In the other room I heard Bruce ask, "Would you go back again, if you had the chance?"

"Hell, yeah! I'd go back in a second!" Douglas answered. He was talking in the voice I couldn't stand. "It's not so bad. I don't regret it one bit," he went on, like an endorsement for war.

Immediately, I felt my stomach drop. I knew it was hypothetical, the possibility of him going back, but he didn't hesitate when he answered, not a millisecond of thought about me and what I might want. What if I didn't want him to go? What if I said no? I felt the nausea rise up again and tried to swallow it. It was imaginary, this other life, but still it made me sick.

Then Douglas called me into the living room. “Sweetie,” he said. “Where’s the movie?” It was his way of asking me to pop in the DVD for *Apocalypse Now*, which is what he watched nearly every day. By now, I’d seen it at least fifty times and I was over it. But Douglas would quote from it: “Charlie don’t surf,” or “You’re in the asshole of the world, Captain.” He had the whole thing memorized. For him, I guess, it was like stepping through, re-joining the action.

One afternoon when we’d returned from another doctor’s appointment, the house was quiet, almost eerie without the sound of the television. Douglas hobbled toward his recliner, the uneven clop of his crutches on the wood floor. He said, “Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker.” He startled me. I looked at him for a moment before I realized he was quoting.

“Are you serious?” I had asked. But he started laughing.

I found the DVD for Douglas and Bruce and slid it in the player. Then I stood up to leave. Douglas reached for me. “Watch it with us,” he said. “I want you to be here.”

I hesitated, then sat on the sofa. But I didn’t pay attention. I stared at a picture on the wall that was crooked and considered getting up to straighten it.

“Imagine all this is sand,” Douglas told Bruce about the jungle and the palm trees in the movie. “Imagine wearing flea collars around your ankles to keep all the fuckin’ fleas from biting.”

“No kidding,” Bruce said.

“And then being loaded down with combat ammo: M16 ammo, grenades, smoke grenades, grenade-launcher ammo, and C-4.”

“No kidding,” Bruce said again. It was interesting to me how Bruce didn’t talk about God that much. I thought that’s all he would be saying.

They watched the movie for a half hour and no one spoke. It was almost like Bruce forgot why he was with us. The movie

took over the room. Then Bruce asked, "After everything you've been through, if you had sons, would you encourage them to join the Army and fight?" He looked past Douglas when he spoke, not really listening for an answer. Perhaps he thought he already knew.

But Douglas said, "Fuck, no! Never!" He told Bruce, "I have a cousin who was going to sign up and I told him: forget it. Don't even think about it. No one should have to go through that shit."

I looked over at Douglas and wondered if he knew what he was saying. Just a moment ago he'd told Bruce he'd go back, no question. Was he being inconsistent? The fact that he'd absorb injury and risk his life but not want others to go through that—what else do you call that? It was not easy. There were so many days I wanted to trade and then there were moments like this.

Then Douglas turned back to the movie and it was gone. "Watch this part...this is the part where they play Wagner." He stopped the DVD and went back.

"Oh, right," Bruce said. "Wagner."

On the screen, the helicopters were coming in. Douglas and Bruce couldn't stop watching. It was the music. Douglas played it back again. He turned the volume all the way up. Bruce nodded. The music, the loudness filled everything. There was no room for me.

I felt sick and got up to leave.

"Wait." Douglas reached for my hand. I could barely hear him over the soundtrack, the strings and the horns and the cop-ter blades. "Please," I thought I heard him say.

I didn't have it in me to say no. Anyway, who was I to deny him this much? I sat back down on the sofa. But I put my hands over my ears. "It's too much," I mouthed. "Turn it down."

Occasionally I thought about calling Moe, the advocacy woman, to ask if she had ever been married to a soldier who came back injured. I wanted to ask her: What do you do if they

don't try to choke you? What if they suffocate you with silence instead? I wanted to know, what happens when you send a person away to war and that's it, they disappear?

Then Bruce spoke. It was like he was reading my mind. He said, "What would you say to other Army families who have loved ones overseas?" On the TV, the fight scene was over but I didn't want to watch the rest of the movie. I knew what was coming.

"I'd tell them, I'm very proud of him," I whispered. Douglas smiled. I looked at him and smiled back. I coughed and tried to say it again, louder. If I had a voice, I'd tell them the war is not over.