

*Josh Sopiartz*

## Homecoming

Those who have died for their country will never be forgotten. Their sacrifice will live on forever in the hearts of all who cherish freedom.

—*Hallmark Card*

Just about the time the United States military began its race into Iraq in the spring of 2003 I was at a drugstore in my girlfriend Lisa's hometown of Normal, Illinois (home of the Redbirds) looking to pick up a six-pack and a pair of cheap flip-flops for a barbeque later that night and, since Mother's Day was quickly approaching, I seized the opportunity to peruse the various pink and lavender cards with my beer and sandals in tow. The decision was difficult. Which card expressed my love and admiration for the woman who bore me, raised me, and saw me through twenty-three years of sports, refusals to get ready for church, rides home from school, and last minute curfew extension requests? The decision was difficult.

However, I was not alone in that drugstore. I was with Lisa—we've since married—and she was also looking for a card, carrying a six-pack, and a pair of flips. She has dozens of pairs of thong sandals, and my mother and sister find this fact utterly amusing. Each birthday or holiday Lisa gets at least one thing flip-floppy from either my mom or sister, Pam. This past birthday it was a lightweight black sweater with orange and pink flips embroidered on it and a sandal-shaped picture frame. I glanced over at her; it was cool in the store, but hot outside and her forehead was dotting with sweat. It was cool inside, but the decision was difficult; I was beginning to sweat myself.

I'm a funny card kind of guy. I often buy cards that little children would pick for their mothers. I think cute cards are often more honest than those sappy-serious ones, and the ones I pick usually have an animal of some sort saying something witty. For Lisa's birthday last April I got her a card that looked like it had been snatched from a fireplace after it was casually, but mistakenly, tossed

directly on the bluest flames. It had a mole on the front and it read, "I burned you a CD for your birthday." Inside it continued, "I should have let it cool down first." Any card with a rodent is especially effective given that I've been told I look a little like a mole without my glasses because my eyes are small and squinty, and my teeth are not BIG, but *bigger*.

By the time we both decided on cards we were sweating like the bottles of beer we were holding. "You'd think it'd get easier each year," I said. "Tell me about it," was Lisa's reply. We were headed to the check out when a foot-tall stuffed Uncle Sam caught my attention.

The star-spangled patriarch was lanky and looked a bit like Colonel Sanders without his signature thick, black-rimmed glasses. By now I'm used to the headings drugstore greeting cards are organized under. I'm accustomed to categories like "Birthday-Hers," "Mother's Day—Sentimental," or "Mother's Day—Humorous" (my favorite), but I had never seen a category like the one behind Uncle Sam before. I had just put the lanky doll down after soliciting a smile from Lisa by pointing one of his hands at her and saying gruffly, "I want you... to go to bed with me!" Lisa humored me with a giggle and I set Uncle Sam down comfortably on his shelf. Just behind him was a patriotic blue card category header that read "Military Condolences." "Give me a second Lis," I uttered, and Lisa started searching for a "Thinking of You" card for her friend Monica.

About a year before I bought that beer and that Mother's Day card I was walking across the stage of Eastern Illinois University's Lantz Arena as a college graduate. I was twenty-two and Lisa was in the audience with a number of my friends and family. I had been living with a number of guys for a few years prior to that graduation. Roommates came and went, but there was always one constant. We met as freshmen while living on the same floor of Thomas Hall—Four North. We became friends and lived in three different locations around town and campus before he graduated early and moved to Ft. Lauderdale. He always said he'd go, but we never believed him. Still, while many of my good friends were walking through with me, Jeff wasn't, and that was strange. It meant he wouldn't be at the party that night, and though it may sound odd, neither would his old man.

"Here you dudes go," Jeff's dad said at the football game as he handed us each a large cola and a small glass bottle of rum to share. "Just in case you get thirsty." Later as the afternoon progressed and our section of the stadium fell into the shade he came back from a bathroom break with as many hot chocolates as he could carry. Our home team was losing. "I've got schnapps too," he drunk-whispered to us with a wicked grin and airy laugh before he produced a glass bottle with clear peppermint contents. "Let's go you jerks! Time, she's a runnin' out!" I wasn't sure if he was shouting at us or the offense. Either way, I drank up.

It was homecoming 1998. Our Eastern Illinois University Panthers were hosting the rival Redbirds of Illinois State. I noticed Jeff's father Jerry was a big guy, but nicer than almost anyone I had ever met, and that, according to our standards, he was genuinely "cool." By the end of the weekend he had been dubbed "JB"—a nickname he was fond of. We could tell he liked it because he kept shouting "They call me JB!" at the party some of our friends threw later that night.

After his initial trip down JB made it a habit to visit each Homecoming prepared to blow off steam. He worked for a telephone company and he worked hard. His was not a cushy indoors job. It was always exciting when JB was coming to town, and on those nights we hosted our biggest parties.

Like I said earlier, JB is a big guy. He's probably six-four pushing two-fifty. Defensive end big. One Friday night he came down and we were having a party. Seven of us, JB's son Jeff included, lived in a run-down virtual slum just across the street from campus that had been hosting parties for decades; we had to maintain tradition. JB was doing kegstands in the kitchen by midnight. All two-fifty of him inverted over a keg of Keystone Light with a spigot in his mouth and six struggling undergrads beneath him with a kitchen full of young men and women shouting, "twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five... thirty-three," before the flow of cheap beer became too great for his throat and the pale liquid burst from his inflated cheeks through his mouth. He hi-fived me and distinctly told me, "Josh, I love you!" "I love you too JB," I timidly responded, "that was pretty impressive."

I leafed through a number of "Military Condolences" cards that afternoon in the drugstore as Lisa and my beer sweated. It was odd, to say the least. "We thank you for your sacrifice." "Here's to knowing the nation is grateful and united behind you in your time of suffering." Hallmark's seem hardly appropriate for Mother's Day, the mother of Hallmark Holidays, but they seemed even less so as a condolence for the families of the military dead—the Killed In Action. After flipping a bit I decided that some people just weren't good with words and that these cards were, at the very least, representative of the maxim, "It's the thought that counts." I bought a card, though I was unsure how I felt about it, or the others. I bought the card, though I knew no one going to Iraq. I've still got it now, and friends of mine have since been deployed.

It's 5x7, printed on cardstock. I can't identify the font, "Lucida Calligraphy" perhaps. It's classy, I guess. A little pretty... good for consoling I assume. On it is a large oak tree with a blue sky and intermittent puffy-white cumulus clouds. The sun is not in the picture, but you can tell it is setting and its waning light gives the august oak a bit of a golden glow. The tree is very lonely, very stout, and it assumes a superior and genteel posture. Very dignified. It looks like a soldier.

Jeff graduated a semester before any of the rest of us. I got one of his family tickets for the commencement ceremony and I sat through it with JB and his wife Ellen, but not before we grabbed a couple beers at the bar / restaurant where Jeff and I worked. "The dude has done it," JB remarked coyly over a domestic draft. "Yes, he has," I responded, similarly sipping a bubbly pint. JB told me he was proud of Jeff and I could see that he was indeed very, very proud. Later that night JB reminded me that he never finished college and that he instead spent his college years serving in Vietnam during the late sixties.

He has the scars to prove it, and he's especially proud of one particular wound shaped like a crescent moon on his forearm that he received from enemy mortar fire while on his way back from a beer run. His base was shelled in a surprise attack that was part of the Tet Offensive. "I almost lost the beer," he jokingly told me that night over a few stale Bud Lights in that same smoky college bar in Charleston, Illinois. "I almost lost the beer. But I wasn't the craziest. Hell no, helicopter pilots. Those sons-of-bitches. They were easily the craziest! One pilot I knew re-upped after his first tour. The son-of-a-bitch survived too! Crazy bastard!"

Every time JB came down to see us in Charleston he woke us up early Sunday morning, or really, his cooking woke us up. We were young college men and we could not resist the smell of a real breakfast. Apple pancakes, sausage links, and bacon—no matter how late we were up the night before—we woke up for breakfast. JB would cook for seven or eight of us at a time, and afterwards he'd quickly shovel down a plate of his own. In return for his breakfasts JB got the coveted wrap-around seat of the couch pit for Bears games. We cursed Shane Matthews and he cursed Shane Matthews. He cursed Brett Favre and we cursed Brett Favre. We swore it was the spirit of the recently deceased Walter Payton that blocked that field goal that gray afternoon against the Packers at Lambeau. He agreed and, no doubt, thought it before any of us.

At a bar the night of Jeff's graduation JB shared a war story with me for the first time. "One day in Nam," he started, paused, and continued, "some local kids showed up with kites and the younger ones coaxed some of us out to play. There were a few kids and GI's at one end of the base and a small number of others at the other end. The day was clear and these kids showed up a little after noon. We were like big kids too, really, just laughing and trying to get the damn things to fly."

JB elaborated on his struggles, bad wind, no breeze, a too bright sun, before I watched a peculiar and almost crossed look of surprise appear in his eyes. He slammed his beer roughly on the bar's green-and-black-marbled Formica and he lurched forward towards me, sliding to the edge of his barstool. "All of a sudden came the whistling of incoming artillery shells!" He whistled three or four times

in quick succession. His blue eyes wild behind smudged eye-glasses. “Mortars! Boom! Boom! Boom!”

I could see JB and his buddies scrambling to establish defensive positions. I could see the nervous dark eyes of the terrified Vietnamese children. JB caught me off guard. I wasn't ready for his sudden animation and mouthed explosions. He told me that the shelling lasted for a few minutes, five maximum, and that no GI's were killed or injured, but that when the bombs finally stopped dropping the area in between where the kids were flying their kites was cratered. Supplies were destroyed, the air was dusty under a sunny sky, and a brilliant red and black paper dragon lay torn; its bamboo frame still in tact less than a hundred feet from a young boy—a Vietnamese pre-teen, dead, the kite's spindle still in his hands.

“You know Josh?” He half asked later that night. He had drunk a little too much and was getting choked up, “I'm really glad that you and Jeff met, you know?” It was hot in the kitchen. We were at some party across from campus early Saturday morning, close to 3:00 am. The crowd had gone away for the night and it was just us and the guys who lived there left awake. “I hope you guys never have to see the things I saw over there.”

It didn't take long for JB to regain his composure and once he did he asked no one in particular where his handsome young son was. Sensing no imminent, or accurate, response he answered himself boisterously, “Probably making out!” He fixed his belt and straightened out his Eastern Illinois University Homecoming '98 blue, long-sleeved t-shirt that had aged a few years and worn a little around the wrists and collar. After he put himself together he left to find Jeff, content that his son had the opportunity to make out with girls at college parties instead of having to sleep with faded photos of them beneath ponchos in the middle of nowhere—in places like the muddy jungles near Khe Sanh.

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