

A L Y S S A M A R T I N O

Free Falling Soldier

Ben slips out the sliding door to my balcony. His calloused hands grip two glasses filled with equal parts Newcastle beer and Woodchuck cider. I balance a plate of Brie and butterfly crackers on my right palm and follow him outside. Across from my fifteenth floor apartment is an office building. Its dark tinted windows reflect and warp us into different shapes: Ben, short and stout like a coffee mug, and me, curvy and complicated like a candlestick.

I set the plate down on a small black end table, glancing at Ben. The pale skin on his face is now freckled. A fresh buzz cut seems to push his ears forward. His feet inhabit clunky but durable brown boots that look as if they could use a good scrub in the sink. Ben hands me my drink then takes a few large gulps of his own. I watch his Adam's apple bob in and out like a buoy at sea.

We sit down on two tiny lime green patio seats. Our silence is obvious as we sip and spread cheese, but whether there's nothing to say, or far too much, I do not know. Ben has been like an older brother to me since his mom dated my uncle, and we unofficially adopted him into our family. He is someone I could only ever love platonically, a very dear friend, yet today I find myself wanting to please him like a husband, to prove I've matured in the two years since we last saw one another.

Ben doesn't mention Afghanistan, the country he returned from last week. The prior night, my uncle looked our soldier directly in the eye and asked, "What's it like over there?" Ben choked out one word: "Tribal." He is nothing like I remember him: comforting, wholesome, and wise. The brotherly figure who advised my

16-year-old self to be cautious around horny teenage boys; who delivered the news my aunt was dying of breast cancer; who, giddy and grinning, used to pile my younger cousins into a big mini van for ice cream runs. Now, Ben's voice is monotone as he recounts tearing his ACL in Haiti playing football with some buddies. When he pours another drink, his movements are robotic, as if someone fused a flagpole to his spine. But I am careful not to judge; I know nothing of what Ben has experienced since enlisting.

Ben stands up and tips his nose over the balcony ledge, balancing on his combat toes.

"Don't freak out at this question," he says, ankles stretched, rising out of his shoes. "But do you ever wonder what it'd be like to just"—his voice slows—"jump?"

I cock my head and stare at him.

"Or not to jump, but to fall all that way?"

I, too, am now perched on my toes, peering down to the pavement, to the sea foam pool, to the inertia of the world below.

What about his next tour? Ben may return with far worse injuries than a torn ligament. Like our high-school class clown, he may not come home at all. I think about what I'd do: hang a yellow ribbon on my balcony—right near the plant Mom sent when I graduated college and moved 400 miles from home. I suddenly have the urge to toss it over the edge, to let those roots feel no weight but their own as they tumble to the earth below.

I don't really think Ben's going to jump. Not now. Not here. Probably not ever. But his question leaves me unsettled. I think of the newspaper headlines, the rising soldier suicide rate, what horrific things he might have witnessed abroad. My fingers fidget together, antsy, anxious bones on a loom.

And so I'll lie, reassuring him it's fine, it's normal, if only to curb his plan to free fall straight back to Kandahar or Kabul.

"Sure," I tell Ben, faking a smile. "I've thought about falling. We all have."

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