

BOBBY BRIGGS

Service with a Smile

“I’ve got a story,” I said. “It’s a war story.” It was late October in 2014, and except for my friends Josh-Wade and Lizzie, I’d just met everybody at the restaurant either that Sunday morning for brunch or earlier that weekend in Baton Rouge for the Ole Miss game. Jared, Sydnie, Maggie, Chad, and I had ordered the bottomless mimosas and bloody marys. I was two, maybe three, mimosas deep, and I cannot remember if I had mentioned before now that I was in the Army.

I rarely tell war stories, but sometimes, when the moment feels right, or the liquor loosens my gums, one slips out. I usually keep the stories light, like the time a baby goat ran onto my helicopter during an exfil, or my first night in Afghanistan when I drew my gun on a Taliban mouse, or the time I pulled off an elaborate prank advertising a Justin Bieber concert with opening acts from Rascal Flatts and Sean Kingston. I’d even told Josh-Wade a couple war stories while we were running at Ole Miss as a method of distracting him from the discomfort. I’d never told this particular story before, and, looking back, Sunday brunch with strangers might not have been the most opportune moment.

Even though Ole Miss had suffered their first loss of the season the night before, this had been a great weekend. Sydnie, Lizzie’s sorority sister when they were undergrads at LSU, and her husband, Jared, hosted us. Back home in Oxford, my wife, Jaime, was up all night with three-year-old twin boys in the throes of ear infection season. While she was tending to coughing fits and low-grade fevers three days after her birthday, I was enjoying one of Jared’s chocolate margaritas, complete

with chocolate straw, concocted in his lime-green Jimmy Buffett Margarita Machine.

When Josh-Wade had told me we would be staying with Lizzie's sorority sister, I had pictured a weekend full of the same fake smiles and wealthy sense of entitlement that permeates Ole Miss's sorority row. Josh-Wade, a native of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, embodies everything one desires in a Canadian: bearded, thick, overly-friendly, and one could easily imagine him standing in the middle of a river, shirtless and hairy, taking a bite out of a salmon he had just pulled from the water with his bare hands. He and Lizzie started dating at Ole Miss. Lizzie, an olive-skinned Vietnamese-American with a perfectly round face, soft brown eyes, and a disarming smile, has the tendency to zone out of a conversation and think about, literally, nothing.

Sydney was refreshingly down to earth, and Jared had a sharp wit and a way of making you feel like you were always in on the joke. I knew Jared was a keeper when he joined Josh-Wade and me in our rendition of Taylor Swift's *Shake it Off* while walking across LSU's campus. In fact, he had to carry us through the parts where the lyrics get tricky. In addition to taking us out for the best pulled pork sandwich I've ever eaten, Sydney and Jared introduced us to their guilty pleasure: *Baggage*, a dating show hosted by Jerry Springer that reveals each potential suitor's "baggage" in painfully awkward rounds of self-admission. Only later would I realize the irony behind the story I was about to tell and the T.V. show, *Baggage*.

On the far end of the brunch table that Sunday were Chad and Maggie. Maggie was tall and pretty in the traditional sense with straight brown hair and high cheeks. She, like Lizzie and Sydney, was funny, grounded, and easy to talk to. Chad was not. Chad, as Maggie hinted at the night before, had a bit of a gambling/drinking problem. Instead of meeting Maggie at our tailgate, as planned, Chad joined his old buddies for an all night bender. Chad was still drunk at brunch, and his bloodshot eyes, three-day stubble, and slurred speech reminded me of the guy my mom almost married, Earl, who lived with us when I was in elementary school and made over three thousand dollars a month at an office supply store, a fact Earl brought up many times while giving his inebriated *work hard in school* speech.

Brunch was the perfect way to end the weekend before getting back on the road with Josh-Wade and Lizzie. It was a clear sunny day, perfect flying weather. We sat on the patio at two metal tables of unequal height. I was the seventh wheel. I sat on the corner.

I could see myself becoming good friends with everyone at the table except Chad. I felt like I had known them since high school. The conversation was such that I felt

comfortable and in an element I had not experienced since I was in Afghanistan the year before. Maybe that, too, fostered a false sense of camaraderie with my brunch-mates as the girls were sharing funny sorority memories, and all of us were enjoying making fun of our waiter's bowl cut and dark sunken eyes as he struggled to remember drink and food orders.

"My guess is he's on Molly," Josh-Wade said.

"No way. Have you looked at his eyes? Definitely meth," Sydnie said.

"Either way, he's not going to last long at this job," Lizzie said. She was right. Portico would be closed down within a year, and if he wasn't fired, I'm pretty sure our waiter contributed to its demise.

My chair was the only one without shade from the sun, which may have assisted the alcohol in loosening my inhibitions and ability to gauge the mood of the table. I had just housed a four-story brunch burger stacked with a sausage patty, Black Angus beef, two fried eggs, bacon, three kinds of cheese, and dressed with a special sauce that I'm convinced was made from unicorn blood.

Our mathematically challenged waiter had finally delivered another round of mimosas, bloody marys, and a second incorrectly totaled check for Josh-Wade and Lizzie. Bringing the checks, we guessed, was a hint that we were probably on our last round of not-really-bottomless drinks. Nobody, except Chad, looked ready to leave. Josh-Wade was trying to explain simple addition and subtraction to the waiter, so with everyone's partially-divided attention, I offered the story.

"As far as I know, I've had four RPGs fired at me. Well, not me, as a person, but at my helicopter. But it should have been five, maybe six. This is about one of those times that it should have been me." I put my unused silverware on my plate and pushed it away. "I flew the Chinook helicopter, which is the big one with two rotor blades" (I spun my pointer fingers in the air about shoulder-width apart) "that looks like a giant green penis." Maggie chuckled.

I heard Josh-Wade tell the waiter that he'd overcharged them ten dollars as Josh-Wade pointed to the total on the receipt with a pen. The waiter bent at the waist and squinted at the numbers that befuddled him. Maggie was on the other end of the table and leaned forward to hear me better. Sydnie and Jared were on my right and turned in their chairs to face me. Chad stared at a wooden post, or the sky, or a future with multiple DUIs, broken relationships, and cirrhosis of the liver. I reached for a napkin and one of the pens the waiter left with our checks.

"Okay, so I'm a picture person," I said. I drew for them a rudimentary map of Afghanistan. On this map, I scribbled some triangles diagonally across the country to represent the Hindu Kush mountains. I pointed to the western border with Iran,

the eastern border with Pakistan, and the northern border with various other –stans: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and maybe some other –stans. I flipped the napkin over and drew the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. “This is where I worked.”

I drew some more triangle mountains to show the Kunar River Valley, the gateway to the Hindu Kush, that runs north-south along the Pakistan border. I drew a dot at the southern end of the valley. “This is Jalalabad Airfield, or JBAD. This is where I lived. Twenty-five miles north is a city called Asadabad, or ABAD. We normally refuel here before and after we go into the Pech River Valley.” I drew a line perpendicular to the Kunar River Valley from ABAD to the edge of the napkin to represent the Pech. “This is a bad, bad place. Have any of you seen the movie *Restrepo*?”

“No, but I’ve heard of it,” Jared said as Sydnie and Maggie shook their heads slowly. Chad pulled on his face.

“It’s a super-powerful movie and really emotional,” I said.

Sydnie shook her head rapidly. “Sydnie can’t watch movies like that,” Jared said. Sydnie shook her head faster.

“Well, the four RPGs launched at me, and the other one that should have hit me, came from somewhere in the Pech. Also, this story starts after we had just finished a resupply mission in the Pech.”

I pointed to a spot on the Pakistan border east of ABAD. “This is Ghaki Pass, and it’s a known Taliban border crossing point.”

“Okay,” I put the pen on the napkin and pushed it a little closer to the center of the table. I took another drink of my mimosa. “Like I said, we had just left the Pech, and we landed at ABAD to refuel. We had one last mission before heading home. We were supposed to take approximately thirty Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers and a pallet of water up to Ghaki Pass.”

I told them that a Chinook has thirty-three seats, but in an emergency, can carry more. The average Chinook, combat loaded, weighs just over 30,000 pounds, and a pallet of water weighs 8,000 pounds. A Chinook can carry a max load of 50,000 pounds, including the weight of the helicopter. An average American soldier, fully loaded, weighs about 250 pounds, but when they are Afghani, we change that to 175 pounds for planning. One Chinook could easily carry a pallet of water and thirty Afghanis unless we are operating at high altitudes.

I was flying with Rob. He was the Air Mission Commander that night, and I liked flying with him because he was one of our best pilots. Our call sign was Lift One.

“Looks like only half the PAX are here,” Rob announced over the radio to Lift Two, the other Chinook helicopter on the mission. “It doesn’t make sense for both of us go to up to Ghaki. Since I planned it, I’ll take it.” Lift Two had already hooked up to the fuel hoses so they didn’t respond. Rob was a muscular country boy from Nebraska with a thick Midwest accent. He had a sharp wit, bic-shaved head, legs, and chest, and, as the company’s safety officer, was averse to taking part in anything he didn’t plan himself.

Rob switched frequencies and called the Apache helicopters to let them know our plan. “We’re just gonna grab a splash of gas and hook up this load of water,” Rob said. The Apaches, who were our escorts/bodyguards, didn’t need to refuel, so they were circling above Asadabad City, probably looking for someone to kill. “Which one of you gun-ships will be joining us?” Rob asked.

“Lift One, this is Gun One, it’ll be us,” the voice said over the internal frequency.

“Great, Gun Two can’t see shit anyway,” Rob said. He tapped my right shoulder with the back of his left hand and grinned.

“Fuck you, Rob, I can *see* that you need to go to the gym more often,” Gun Two said.

“Shit, I’m heading to the gym after this mission if you ain’t a bitch.”

“Oh, I’ll be there, watching you tear the shit out of that elliptical.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot, you only lift lats. You know, friends don’t let friends skip leg day,” Rob said.

“Shit, Rob. We ain’t friends.”

I was smiling at the exchange and monitoring the gauges in our cockpit when an infrared illumination round lit up the sky above Ghaki. I leaned forward to look at the bright light, which hung in the air like a star for 120 seconds before fading into the darkness. Ghaki was more than a mile away, and a smaller mountain obstructed my view of the pass itself. The moon wasn’t out, so when another illumination round lit up over Ghaki, it revealed the dark mountains that rose all around us, casting long shadows along the valley floor. Rob didn’t have his night vision goggles down, so he couldn’t see the infrared illum rounds.

“Hey, Rob, someone’s shooting illum rounds over Ghaki,” I said.

Rob flipped his goggles down and looked out my window. He got on the radio and called ABAD control to find out what was happening. After a few moments, ABAD control got on the radio to tell us that both rounds sent over Ghaki came

from the howitzers at a nearby U.S. base, FOB JOYCE, because they'd heard reports of movement in the area.

I noticed that Jared cocked his head a little when I mentioned the report of movement in the area and figured I needed to explain. I told everyone at the brunch table that Ghaki Pass, until three days earlier, had been manned by a three-letter agency and a small contingent of Afghan Special Forces. As part of the long-term plan to transfer ownership of Afghanistan's security to Afghanistan's forces, Ghaki had been handed over to Afghan control. A fifteen-man squad of ANA soldiers was left to guard the pass until we could drop reinforcements the next night. Weather had kept us down, and tonight would be the first time we could attempt the resupply.

Jared gave an understanding nod.

"Hey, Guns, you guys see anything up there?" Rob asked.

"It's hard to tell from here, and FOB JOYCE isn't announcing their rounds, so I don't feel like getting much closer," Gun One said.

"Well, I'm not goin' up there to get an illum round shot up my ass," Rob said. "Let me make some calls."

Rob called ABAD control for an update, to which ABAD responded, "Wait One." Rob cursed to himself and pulled out the Blue Force Tracker, a moving map that allows us to send text messages to friendlies (blue forces) all over the country, and sent a message to our Tactical Operations Center (TOC). After approximately fifteen minutes of sending messages back and forth, our boss, Lieutenant Colonel Von Eschenbach (which we shortened to Lieutenant Colonel V), made the call to cancel the mission and ordered us to head home.

"Hell, yeah," Rob said. "Let's get out of here before they change their minds."

ABAD and JOYCE were pissed when we told them that our boss ordered us home. They tried to play the guilt card and told us that the ANA troops up there were black on water and weather looked bad for tomorrow.

"Sorry, ABAD control, I want to help them out, but our Squadron Commander ordered us to head home, and I'm not in the business of ignoring orders from superior officers," Rob said.

"Roger, but our Brigade Commander is telling us to make this mission happen," ABAD said.

"Well, this sounds like a discussion that needs to take place above our pay grade," Rob said. "We'll see you guys tomorrow."

ABAD didn't respond.

Rob turned to me. "Take us home, Captain Briggs."

“Roger.” I grabbed the controls, called for departure, and eased the bird off the ground, being careful not to overfly the artillery. JOYCE sent another illum round over Ghaki. “I wonder what’s going on up there?”

“Hell if I know, but I’m not on the schedule tomorrow, so it’s not my problem.”

Sydnie looked shocked by Rob’s reaction, and I felt the need to defend Rob’s statement. “Rob did care,” I said. “He was all talk. If he had known what was going to happen, we never would have left.”

I told them that I wasn’t on the schedule the next night either, but something about Lieutenant Colonel V’s decision to cancel the mission didn’t sit right. He rarely, if ever, took the decision out of the hands of the pilots. I remember feeling like we didn’t get the full story behind the decision, and when we got back to the TOC, Lieutenant Colonel V pulled Rob and me to the side and asked if we had received any pressure to ignore his orders.

“Just the normal bitchin’,” Rob said. “Nothing unusual, Sir.” I nodded in agreement. The whole exchange at ABAD did seem odd, but ground units were always trying to convince us to do one or two more things while they had us on hand.

“Good,” Lieutenant Colonel V said rubbing his right fist into his left palm. “Just so we’re clear, you’re my guys, and I have full authority of the aircraft under my command.” I had never seen Lieutenant Colonel V so spun up. I could tell he wanted to say something about what had set him off, but he was too professional to talk about anyone behind his or her back.

The Battle Captain didn’t share this virtue. As soon as Lieutenant Colonel V walked out of the TOC towards his office, the Battle Captain told us that the ground force commander, Colonel Pompas, had ripped into Lieutenant Colonel V because his pilots (Rob and I) were a bunch of pussies who were scared to fly. Colonel Pompas was one rank higher than Lieutenant Colonel V, and his bullying tactic backfired when Lieutenant Colonel V referred to the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that grants the Aviation commander full authority over the aircraft in his fleet.

“That’s why Lieutenant Colonel V is the best boss I’ve ever had,” Rob said.

I nodded in agreement. Lieutenant Colonel V was also the kind of boss who encourages every soldier to have something, besides work, that they can escape into to keep their sanity. This escape could take many forms: video games, Skype with family, reading. For me it was running.

After we finished the flight debrief with the Battle Captain, turned in our gear, and made our way to the B-Huts to change, Rob went to the gym, and I hit the road, alone. While I was in Afghanistan, I ran, a lot. It was my release. I ran because I

could be alone with my thoughts. It was how I processed my day, my experiences, my emotions. It's how I forgot.

The next afternoon, I woke up earlier than normal. We were at the end of summer, and even though I had lofted my plywood bed to sit right next to the air-conditioner, I still woke up every day encased in sweat and a light coat of dust. I showered, changed, and made my way across the runway to the Company CP.

I have fond memories of JBAD, but the landscape was ugly. Besides the freshly paved runway, JBAD was all dirt and rock. JBAD was hot. Even the wind was hot. One of my guys said it was "like sitting in an oven while someone pointed a blow-dryer at you." That's probably why I always ran at night—that, and an irrational fear of snipers.

We only kept one crew on day shift, which always included our Maintenance Test Pilot, Steve. Steve was our most experienced pilot with over twenty years in the Army, and this was probably his fifth or sixth deployment. Steve had made a deal with our company commander that he would keep the birds in the air as long as he didn't have to go out on any missions. Steve used to be an infantryman, and he was looking forward to submitting his retirement packet when we redeployed around Thanksgiving. Steve was tall, thin, and always smiling. He could talk to anyone, and he had been known to start a conversation at lunch and still be in the same seat, in the same conversation, at dinner. He had even befriended the locals. They were building us a new Chinook parking ramp when he brought them ice-cold Gatorades on a scorching day. Steve was often invited into their work tents for tea, and I had the pleasure of joining him a few times when I was on day shift. Nobody questioned Steve's new friendships until the time that Hussein, the engineer, brought Steve a traditional Afghani outfit that Steve wore to work the next day. That ruffled a few feathers, mainly Rob's.

I started every day by finding Steve and getting an update on maintenance. I also really enjoyed talking to him. But that day, Steve was not in the CP or the maintenance office. On my way back across the runway to our ramp to look for someone on the day crew, I popped into the TOC.

"Hey, Beau, you seen Steve or any of the day hookers?" I asked. Hookers is a term used when referring to Chinook crews, mainly because of the large hooks under our helicopters used to carry heavy loads.

"Day crew's on the ramp, and Steve's on his way back from Ghaki," Beau said.

"Ghaki?"

"Oh shit, you haven't heard?"

“Heard what?”

“Pull up a chair.”

Beau told me that after Rob and I went to bed last night, Colonel Pompas went nuts. He went over the head of the Aviation Brigade Commander to the General and demanded that Ghaki get resupplied immediately. The General ordered Bravo Company (one of the other Chinook companies in our Brigade) to complete the resupply, a leg they added to another mission they were already flying to Paruns.

“They went to Ghaki last night?” I asked.

“No, during the day,” Beau said.

“The day? Did anybody tell Bravo what was going on last night?” I tried to remember if I mentioned the illum rounds and the reported movement around Ghaki to the Battle Captain last night during the post-mission debrief. I must have. Why wouldn’t I?

“Just wait, it gets better.” Beau clicked on his computer a few times and brought up the mission card and map for the Bravo Company mission. “Notice anything unusual?”

I examined the mission card. “They don’t have any Apaches,” I said.

“Yep, and their sister ship was a Blackhawk.” Beau often criticized Blackhawks for their weaker engines and insufficient firepower. Not that Chinooks have significant firepower either, but our engines did make us useful in Afghanistan’s higher terrain.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“You know that cement bunker that sits behind Ghaki’s LZ?” Beau asked.

“Yeah.”

“Some Haji was sitting in there with an RPG and sent one into the back of the Chinook.”

I sat back in my chair and put my hands over my head. “Is everybody okay?”

“The computer added the bill incorrectly, so I had to manually override it to make it right,” the waiter said.

“No, the computer was right. You still overcharged us ten dollars,” Josh-Wade said. Lizzie put her hand on Josh-Wade’s arm. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Me and the manager both looked at it. The only way to fix it was to manually override it.”

“So you’re telling me that you *and* the manager looked at this, and it’s still wrong?” Josh-Wade asked. “Look...”

Josh-Wade continued to explain the error. I noticed Sydnie was staring at her empty plate. I have no idea what Chad was doing.

I told them that I would later learn that the 15 ANA soldiers guarding the pass until reinforcements arrived had run out of bottled water within the first 24 hours. As a result, a few of them went to a nearby town to get water from the well. Someone tipped off the local Taliban leader who took the opportunity to capture Ghaki Pass and setup an ambush.

“I have spent many late-night runs reflecting on Bravo’s mission and my mission the night before,” I said. “If Lieutenant Colonel V hadn’t ordered us to come home, that would have been us on Ghaki. I couldn’t understand why Bravo Company took the mission without asking us why we turned it down.” I told the table that I called my best friend Will, who was the Battle Captain when Bravo Company took off, and asked him what he knew. Will was beating himself up because he thought it was his fault for not looking into the mission more fully when he came on shift, and I tried to tell him it wasn’t his fault.

We learned a lot more when Steve got back from Ghaki. He gave us his account and showed us the video he took as part of the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART).

The next night, Rob and our most experienced crewmembers had to slingload the downed Chinook back to JBAD, and before the Aircraft Accident Investigation Team could secure the bird, Steve and I snuck on to look at the damage. The first thing I noticed was the blood.

“It looks like melted crimson crayons,” I said. Blood had adhered to the ramp and the seats. Small pools had collected around rivets and d-rings giving the impression the blood wasn’t fully dry.

“I figured they would have washed it out by now,” Steve said.

“There’s more than I expected.”

Steve stood on the ramp, faced outward, and looked up. He moved his arm in a large arc to show me where the shrapnel had sprayed into the hydraulic and fuel lines directly above the ramp. “It’s a perfect circle,” he said, still amazed. “I figure Sam was standing right here when it hit him.” He showed me the path of the charge that tumbled towards the front of the helicopter seeking out another victim. I still had questions.

I kept seeking out information because I needed to know if anyone blamed Rob and me for not taking the mission. I know I did. It should have been our bird up there. It was supposed to be our mission. Could we have done anything to change what happened? Did I tell the Battle Captain about the illum rounds? I’m certain I did, I think.

The waiter hadn't been back for a while. I remember Josh-Wade was staring at me intently, and I think everyone at the table, Chad included, was waiting for me to continue. I prefaced my next statement by saying that since I wasn't there, some of the events are speculation. However, I have done my best to gather the most complete and accurate record possible.

I glimpsed our waiter walking onto the patio with another receipt.

"The next time I was in Bagram, I found the pilots and got their version of the story. Spotts didn't really want to talk about it, but Astorga, who we called Astro and sported the sickest moustache in the Brigade, indulged me.

"Spotts and Astro arrived at Ghaki in the morning. They had about twenty passengers onboard, and they had just dropped the water. Nobody had told the flight crew anything about what happened the night before, so the pilots and crew were treating it like any routine drop off. When Spotts set his aircraft down on the LZ, the ramp gunner lowered the ramp to let the passengers off. There was no sense of urgency as the passengers walked off the ramp. In fact, one of the interpreters walked back onto the helicopter to grab a bottle of water. As he turned to walk back off the ramp, a Taliban fighter raised from the cement bunker just off the south end of the LZ and launched an RPG into the back of the Chinook.

"The RPG hit the interpreter in the stomach, splitting him in half. I don't know if I ever learned the interpreter's real name, but Steve named him Sam. The rocket exploded when it hit Sam, and the shrapnel of the rocket sprayed in an arc at the ramp, disabling the aircraft. The concussion of the blast blew the doors off the helicopter. The cabin was instantly filled with smoke and fire. The charge from the RPG continued through Sam's body and found its next target, the left door-gunner, Sergeant Patterson, and took his legs.

"Spotts tried to take off. He pulled an armpit full of power" (I made the motion of grabbing the collective at my left side and yanking it up the side of my body), "but because the hydraulic lines were gone, the bird only screamed in place. Almost instantly, they began to take small arms fire from the opposite ridge.

"What happened next, probably due to the chaos of battle, is unclear. Eventually, the Blackhawk was able to land and carry the flight crew to an aid station while the ground forces pulled security over the fallen angel.

"A short time later, Steve led the DART team to the site to evaluate the damage and assess whether or not the aircraft was recoverable. He told us that they started taking fire from another ridgeline as soon as they landed on the LZ. By this time, some Air Force and Navy bombers were overhead, and they dropped a two hundred and fifty pound bomb on the bad guys. The blast and concussion

was so great though that Steve thought the bombers were accidentally aiming at them. The small arms fire continued and the bombers dropped a bigger bomb, a five hundred pounder, on the same ridge. This silenced the enemy, for a while.

“Steve turned on his video camera to begin the assessment. When Steve got to the ramp, he saw Sam. Nobody had taken the time to cover Sam up, and his legs were still lying on the ramp. His torso had been thrown onto the seats to the left, and his head was hanging off the edge. ‘I tried to cover him,’ Steve said. ‘It seemed more respectful.’ The blanket didn’t cover all of the body, and when Steve showed us the video of his assessment, he didn’t warn us that half of Sam’s torso and his feet were still visible. It looked like a magic trick.”

I started to notice everybody at the brunch table becoming uneasy with the story after this statement. But it was too late now.

“When it was all over, the damage, with the exception of Sam and Sergeant Patterson, wasn’t really all that bad. Both pilots had concussions; the ramp gunner, Sergeant Allen, had burns on his face and shrapnel wounds; Specialist Huber took shrapnel in his thigh that the doctors left in place because they said removing it would cause more damage; Sergeant Patterson lost both of his legs; and two infantry escorts, a Captain and a Staff Sergeant, I think, were wounded. Sam was the only person that died, but if he hadn’t walked back onto the bird for a bottle of water, the RPG would have travelled all the way to the cockpit, killing both pilots and both door gunners. He actually saved their lives. He was an involuntary hero.”

“I’m not really sure how to end this story. I guess that’s it,” I said.

Sydney was still staring at her plate.

Maggie gave an uneasy smile.

Jared filled the silence by saying something funny about being glad he was done eating.

Josh-Wade had finally fixed the issue with his receipt.

“Sorry,” I said. And I was, actually, sorry.

I could tell the story didn’t go over well. The mimosas were wearing off, and I felt like I was on an island. Lizzie looked at me with eyes that said, “What did you just do?”

“Cool,” Chad said.

We said our goodbyes, and Josh-Wade, Lizzie, and I walked with Sydney and Jared out to the parking lot. I apologized to Sydney and Jared again for bringing down

the brunch. Sydnie tried to assure me that it was fine. "It was a good story," she said. "A little gory." She shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head. "But I enjoyed it."

I think Jared said something about how it is good to be reminded that a world like that exists. I wanted to change the subject. I wanted to run to the car and leave Baton Rouge. I think I said something about the Saints' game.

When I got home to Savannah, GA in 2010, shortly after missing Thanksgiving, I didn't want to be around anyone except Jaime and our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Meredith. But even that was a difficult adjustment.

I dreaded weekends because it meant I had to wait two whole days before I could get back to work and be around my guys again. Don't get me wrong, I was happy to be home, but I felt more comfortable around these guys. I didn't have post-traumatic stress disorder, but I couldn't cope with people, their questions or the way they placed importance on trivial topics like the *American Idol* controversy behind Scotty defeating Lauren. *It doesn't matter.*

I remember, vividly, the moment that I realized I was home, when I could finally relax. It happened more than a week after I had returned, and it came the day after a balloon popping on the neighbor's mailbox caused me to duck and spin violently in my driveway.

"Is everything ok?" Jaime had asked.

"Yeah, I just dropped something," I'd lied.

I woke up early the next morning, about 4 a.m., and I snuck out of the house to go for a run. I was still fond of running in the dark. It was an unusually warm and humid December morning, and I remember a fog had settled in the trees that lined the jogging trail in our neighborhood. I was about two miles into my run when I felt my shoulders relax. Before then, I wasn't even aware that I had been pinching my shoulders in a raised position. How long had they been like that? I was finally able to run without fear. I was overcome with a sense of relief and tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision. I could feel the warm lines streaming down my face when I blinked. I started to laugh. I laughed and cried. I ran.

I've been in Oxford almost two years now, and I still don't feel welcome in my church. I don't like to stay at a Grove tent for too long at football games because I'm afraid of what I might say if caught in conversation. At English Department functions, I try to find a seat that faces no more than one or two people. I get nervous around poets. They make me feel naked and transparent, like they know

my secrets. I'm always looking for ways out of conversations with women, and most men.

For a person who uses stories as a way to connect with people, being unable to share my experiences with those closest to me prevents me from fully integrating. I feel, at times, like I'm living a double life: there's the face I show in public and the one that wants to remain detached, filtering life through the lenses of apathy and cynicism. I think that's why I'm constantly reading people's reactions, making sure I'm not exposing too much. It's exhausting. Even Jaime has said that sometimes she doesn't feel like she knows the real me anymore.

Looking back at brunch in Baton Rouge, I misread the moment. I thought I had an opportunity to connect with these people by bringing them into my world. I was wrong. If our lives are a collection of the stories we carry, what does it mean to exist in a world where you cannot share them?

I don't know what compelled me to tell that story in Baton Rouge. I am not sure what reaction I was expecting. Maybe I was just confirming my suspicion that I will never be able to fully articulate what war was like for me.

And yet I wonder: do these experiences need to be shared? Maybe Jared's wrong; maybe people don't need to be reminded of that world's existence. I'm beginning to believe that War is like Vegas—*what happens here...*

So, I'll stick to the stories about goats and mice and everything nice, at least I won't ruin brunch.



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