Voluntold

“Come and dance with me,” he said as he pulled on my sleeve.

“Not now,” I said shaking my arm loose. “These report cards won’t get done on their own, you know.”

“Just leave it for five minutes,” he said, as he pulled me up from the chair and pressed his chest into me.   
 “Don’t you still like my moves?” he asked pushing his hips against mine.   
 I gave into his whim. I humoured him. I tucked my arms under his and wrapped them around his back, feeling his muscles move under my hands. I laid my head on his shoulder and watched the afternoon sun pouring through our patio doors. The red pines that embraced our property stood tall, their shadows swaying on the blonde wood floor as we moved across together, barefoot.

I wish I could remember how it felt to be standing in his arms, my body touching his. I should have looked into his eyes and watched the words leave his mouth as he sang the tunes we danced to: *End of the Road*, *Hard to Say Goodbye* from *Boys to Men* and his favourite *In the Still of the Night*. He’s always had a warm voice; I should have encouraged him. If only I had left the report cards for one more day. We could have danced to all of our favourite songs.

That was the weekend before he left on course. One more course he *voluntold* to complete, for his other family, the military. Steve was so eager to become a parachute instructor. Another dream was about to come true and he was bursting with excitement. But me? I remember only sadness. I couldn’t believe he was leaving again. Maybe that was the reason I didn’t feel like dancing. We had already spent nine months apart in the last twelve alone. He had missed most of his son’s first year and now he was packing to leave Owen and me again. The military owned his ass, and by extension my ass too. I was sick of it.

“I’ll be home on weekends, it won’t be so bad,” he whispered in my ear.   
[linespace]

Three years it’s been since that day. Already the memories are slipping away. Even photographs don’t bring me back the life we had before.

He believes in not looking back. He keeps his eye on the road ahead.  
 “You need to look forward, Danielle. Remembering won’t change a thing. Why would we want to go back there anyways?”

But what do I do with this past, the one I’m afraid I may some day forget? Steve keeps his memories so neat and tidy, I’m sure they never sabotage his day. Mine are a mess, leaking into everything. I’ll be digging out a purse from the closet and an old movie stub or concert ticket will send me spiralling down. He must have files with tabs and dividers in his mind, the same ones that sit inside his filing box, fastened with duct tape and shoved at the back of the basement storage room marked, “Do Not Open.” My own records are loose and scattered in a shoebox: photos of us when we first started dating, arms wrapped around each other, love notes written in his hand, the small boxes our wedding bands came in. I keep it close and tucked on a shelf in our bedroom closet. When he’s out, I take it down to rifle through, looking for something, I’m not sure what. Each time I peer inside the box, I recognize less. This must be what Alzheimer’s feels like: I look at things that should be familiar, things I ought to recognize because the pictures are of me, though I no longer feel a connection. It’s like looking at my skinny self from twenty years ago, but worse. I want to seal up this box and shove the past deep under the bed, or better yet, put out of sight beside his box in the basement. But I can’t. Instead I fight to preserve the memories of our marriage before the day everything changed.   
 The happy ones, at least. The other ones too.

The day I found the pictures, I was sitting on the couch with half a dozen small plastic bins filled with photos that hadn’t yet made it into a photo album. Steve was reading, sitting on the couch. I thumbed through snapshots of Owen as a baby. In a month, he’d be starting school. Our son wasn’t supposed to grow up this fast. Superhero speed. I just wanted time to stop, even for one day, so I could catch my breath.

I opened the black-and-yellow glossy envelope printed with Kodak in sharp red letters. What I saw stopped my breath. It was like I’d bitten my tongue, a sudden throbbing pain. Then, numbness.

“Look what I just found,” I said, when I could breathe again. I held out the picture, pinching it from the top corners. Steve holding Owen in the lake, his arms up in the air. Steve’s legs are long and lean; Owen’s are chubby, rounded at the knees. Our little boy’s sunhat is covering half of his face but even so, I can see he is seconds away from a meltdown.

Steve glanced up from his book, then looked away.

I pressed on.   
 “Wow, I don’t think we’ve ever looked at these.” The date of our day-trip to the beach printed across the bottom right-hand corner of each photo. Six days before. Proof we had another life.   
 It was Saturday. I was catching up on some work at school, sitting in my classroom.

You *need to go home, Danielle,* a voice in my head said. *Nothing else matters. Just go!* I felt bullied, but I jumped into my van anyway, arriving home just in time to join Steve and Owen on their way to Bear Lake.  
[linespace]

Owen was two and a half. He kept running up the beach, trying to get away from his dad who chased him along the sand, leaving footprints on the shore, big and small. I sat wearing a t-shirt and jeans, sweating in the hot June sun, watching the two of them having fun without me. I wasn’t wearing my bathing suit. I was too insecure about the weight I still hadn’t lost since the baby.   
[linespace]

I never told Steve about the recurring blow I felt to my stomach; the one that often stopped me from taking another step as I walked towards my school to teach for the day, even when he was finally back from Afghanistan, safe and sound. I couldn’t shake the sense that he was still in danger. I’d wake in the night to his voice calling out to me in distress while he snored by my side. I would reach for his body, poking him with my finger, to make sure he was real, then will myself back to sleep. Mouth after mouth, this suffocating sense of doom, a poisonous, invisible gas floating over me.  
 The night before it happened, we called as usual and said goodnight on the phone. He was looking forward to his jumps in the morning. Then, he called me back. Completely out of character for him. “I need to hear your voice just one more time,” he said.  
 “I love you too,” I said. “I’m counting down the nights until you’re finally home with us again.”  
 Why wasn’t I given more? Such nightmares I had! Why couldn’t I dream the part where he falls from the sky? The part where he crashes to the ground? The part where he breaks his back and never walks again, our lives severed. Before and After.

[linespace]

When we moved into our second house, I bought a sleigh bed for us. Steve didn’t want me to, said we couldn’t afford it. I bought it anyway. I just had to have it. I knew I would never find another one as beautiful as this, solid wood with a dark cherry stain.

“Danielle, what were you thinking?” he said, his voice taut with anger as the delivery men set it up in our bedroom. “This isn’t the right time. We already have way too many expenses.”

“I make my own money, Steve, and that bed was a steal. We’ll pay double when it’s finally the right time.”

“Well, at least we’d be able to afford it then. It’s called being responsible.”

“You’re not the one doing the shopping. You don’t know how much a bed costs and this bed was a bargain. Trust me.”

That night, after we unpacked, we fell into our new bed.  
 “Oh god, I’m exhausted,” I said. “I can’t believe how much we did today.”  
 “You hauled ass today Private,” he said. “And you know, this bed doesn’t suck. It’s actually comfortable.”  
 “Really? So you aren’t mad at me anymore?”  
 “Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but I guess after six years of marriage we deserve a real bed. But, we should test it out to be sure.” He kissed my neck.  
 “I don’t know. I think you still need to apologize for freaking out about it,” I teased.  
 “Why don’t I just show you I’m sorry,” he said as he rolled on top of me, muffling my squeals of laughter.  
[linespace]  
I have counted. I’ve slept in that bed for two years and one month. He has slept in it three months plus a week. For me, 761 days; 97 for him. 664 nights alone.

The kid who came to dismantle the bed, couldn’t have been more than twenty, his pants hanging low, t-shirt screaming some obscenity. He took away my cherry impressive sleigh, replaced it with a bed like the ones you see on TV, old people raving about how well they sleep on those late night infomercials.

“You’ll sleep so much better,” Steve said. “You won’t feel me move around at night.

“You’re probably right.”

“And my body won’t hurt so much sleeping on this mattress. You’ll have your own remote control. Plus, reading will be easier. We won’t need a thousand pillows on the bed anymore.”

I like a thousand pillows.

Steve wasn’t home, so he hadn’t heard me yelling at the kid when I saw that he’d set up the new TempuraPedic beds. His bed and my bed — separate. Two singles, side by side, five feet apart, an aisle as wide as a church between them. Like Nanny and Pépère’s room. His side and her side — single and separate. My grandparents’ ancient marriage.

“I’m not an 87-year-old Gramma, buddy!” I shouted. “Put those beds together. Now!”   
 The kid looked stunned, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and got on it right away. I ran downstairs and cried my eyes out in the bathroom while the boy bolted the two beds together. Steve still wasn’t home; he’d had group work for one of his business classes at the College. I tried not to cry when I showed him our new beds with his-and-her remote controls, our lovely wooden sleigh bed in pieces in the basement.

The new beds were a lot like the ones we slept on in Europe, during Steve’s three-week leave from Bosnia. I’d flown to Paris to meet him and we backpacked for three weeks across France, Italy and Spain. Two single beds in one room. We laughed when we saw them and wondered why Europeans had so many hotels with single beds. Didn’t the French still like sex anymore? In room after room, we pushed them together, but no matter how much we tried to keep them from splitting apart, one of us always had the crack under our back. The line was always there.

[linespace]

Three years and, I still hate our separate beds. Even more now than when they arrived. I hate that I have to buy single sheets for his side and my side. I hate that most nights only our hands touch as we meet half way at the crack that divides us, like a lie. I hate that a metal rod links these separate beds. I hate that our guests enjoy our beautiful sleigh bed. Sometimes I lie down in it, but never for very long.   
[linespace]

Steve tells me that when he dreams, he is almost always walking. When I dream, he is never walking. He is sitting in his wheelchair, the one that is always with us. I wish that in my dreams at least I could be standing hand in hand with him, but that never happens. Instead, I dream we are both in wheelchairs struggling to get somewhere. We are circling around the pool at the local Community Centre, each on opposite sides, our hands driving the wheels forward while children and their parents point and stare from inside the pool. We continue around and around, unable to find a way to get into the water. Nobody offers to help.  
[linespace]

I remember how much I despised his wheelchair. An immutable symbol of all lost. This metal chair took up so much space. It crushed my toes if I didn’t pay attention. It refused to fold itself neatly as I hauled it in and out of the car, while people gawked. Now, this manhandling chair is as commonplace as stuffing Owen into his snowsuit.

I look at its bulk in the hallway and I remember the way Steve walked, slightly pigeon-toed. How he always liked to wear big military boots, even on leave. How he shined them every morning before walking off to work, at the base, the toes scuffed by the time he got home. Now his boots always stay looking like new, the soles clean and dry, the toes, smooth and shiny, unused.  
[linespace]

Some things I can’t forget. Some I can’t remember. Unable to leave the scarred landscape of the past, the way he has. I think it’s because if I don’t remember, nobody will.  
 Maybe if I could leach my memories into a chain of paper dolls and grieve the loss of each, I’d be able to snip them off, one by one, and then set them free from my fingertips. I’d watch them float up into the sky, that cursed ruthless sky, until they disappeared into nothingness.

Maybe then I’d let myself unremember, and look forward.   
Just like him.

Phase One: Bosnia 1999

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| ***Phase One: Stage 1: Anticipation of Loss PRE-DEPLOYMENT*** *(Time Frame 1-6 weeks prior to departure)* |
| ***Common Reactions*** |
| *\* Fluctuations in energy levels and mood \* Fantasizing*  *\* Feelings of sadness, anger, excitement, restlessness \* Anxiety, tension, frustration, resentment, depression* |

It’s happening again. I’ve felt it building all week. Short breaths and long sighs as he walks through the house getting ready for work. In the basement, too, for hours at a time, where he’s been checking lists and packing kit: green things in green bags. There is no access to him. Like looking at the ferry slipping away into the distance. You could jump into the water but there would be no point. It won’t turn around, so you shake your fist and walk away. Finally, I couldn’t ignore it. Steve and I were watching TV together, something we seldom did. Sitting was a waste of time, he said, no matter what you’re doing.

“What the hell are you looking for?” He was flipping through the channels, back and forth, at warp speed.

“Anything but this crap.”

“Pick a channel already. Your flicking back and forth is gonna give me a seizure.”

He threw the remote into my lap and walked out to the garage.

“Where you going?” I yelled as he slammed the door.

I grabbed a cushion and flung it across the room, making Molly, our German Shepherd, jump. I snatched the remote from my lap and chucked it into the far corner of the sofa and headed straight for the garage. Like everything under his domain, the garage was organized and tidy. He made Martha Stewart look like an amateur. Perfect rows of bins all aligned and clearly marked in perfect penmanship with a black sharpie. He ignored me as I plopped myself down on the riding lawn mower. He reached for his motorcycle helmet.   
 “What the hell is your problem today?” I said.

“My problem? You’re the bitchy one. We can’t even watch TV without getting into it,” he said, spraying Windex on the visor.   
 I pictured myself grabbing his jet-black helmet out of his hands and whipping it against the wall.

“Get into it? I just told you to commit to a channel. What’s wrong with that? I wouldn’t call that bitchy.”

“No, you’re never bitchy. My mistake.”

“Well maybe I’m just trying to get you plugged in for once.”

“This again! Jesus, Dan, I’m not going there today.”

“You’re so spaced out all the time — in another time zone already! It would be nice if we had an actual conversation once in a while, I don’t know, for shits and giggles even? When will it be convenient for you, Master Corporal — Sir?” He looked at me, loveless. “It’s no wonder women put their Tide boxes in the windows when their husbands are gone. At least then, somebody is paying attention to them!”

I knew I had gone too far. It wasn’t at all what I wanted to say, but it was too late. My words were airborne.

His brown eyes, glared at me, charred black. Without a word, he grabbed his keys, jumped into his truck and drove away, spraying gravel as he spun the tires.  
 Now here I was, sitting on the floor, being judged by my German Shepherd, unsure of the time, staring at the door and wishing I could hear the sound of the stupid truck crunching back into the driveway.

The cycle is in full swing. We have taken up our roles, the ones defined in our issued handbook:   
*“Pre-Deployment is often harder than the actual separation. Spouses should expect higher levels of stress and conflict. This is common and should be understood as standard marital conduct prior to departure.”*

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| ***General Coping Suggestions*** |
| *\* Allow yourself to feel and express all emotional responses \* Encourage all family members to share their feelings \* Complete the Pre-Deployment checklist with your spouse \* Create opportunities for warm and lasting memories; take pictures \* Set realistic goals for yourself for the deployment period* |

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Phase One. We both know it will only get worse.   
 As an infantry soldier, Steve could be deployed at any time — and he lives for it. It’s what he trains for every day. When you train for the Olympics you want to go to the Olympics, at least once. The same goes for the army. You want to put your skills to the test. Playing GI Joe on the base field is not enough.  
 I married into the army four years ago. For better or for worse. There is no special clause in the marriage vows for military wives.

He comes home a few hours later, after a workout at the gym on the base. This is what he does with his free time. At least he’s not a drinker, I tell myself. He jogs back through the streets of Petawawa, takes a shower and sleeps on the couch, without even entering the bedroom to get a change of clothes. I stay awake, flipping from one side to other, and eventually tossing the comforter off the bed. Finally, I count myself to sleep: how many nights we have together before he leaves, how many more nights we will spend apart.  
[linespace]   
In the weeks before he left, I started to isolate myself from friends and family. I didn’t have the energy to reassure them, to convince them that I’d be fine. I was tired of having to be strong for everyone so they could go on living their normal lives, without interruption. I wanted to feel sorry for myself without having to apologize.

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| ***Phase One: Stage 2: Detachment and Withdrawal PRE-DEPLOYMENT*** *(Time Frame 1 week prior to departure.)*  Mine started three weeks early. |
| ***Common Reactions*** |
| |  | | --- | | *\* Reduced emotional and sexual intimacy \* Feelings of despair, hopelessness, impatience, numbness* | |

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| |  | | --- | | ***General Coping Strategies*** | | *\* Accept your feelings as normal reactions to challenging circumstances \* Communicate as openly and honestly as possible \* Be patient with yourself and family members \* Keep the last day free for family time \* Ignore rumours and rely on official sources of information* | |
|  |

I’m not like this all the time. Some days I wake up angry. Mad at the world. I drive, like an idiot, tailgating innocent drivers. As I march through the grocery store, I curse at the music that fills the aisles; pathetic elevator tunes mixed with cheesy love songs. Single people holding their single basket with a solitary dinner disgust me. Mothers and children filling their carts with chicken nuggets and fruit loops make me sick. Everything aggravates me. I avoid pleasantries and despise the clerks who ask: “How are you today?” I don’t have the energy to lie. I want to tell them to eat shit.

Other days, I feel like Wonder Woman, flexing my muscles to conquer everything on my to-do list. Call Bell to change the long distance plan. Organize the closets. Roll all of our change and deposit it at the bank. I paint the trim in the office, put up that shelf that’s been sitting against the wall for the last two months, and call the oil guy to fill up the tank. I do it all.

Then, before I know it, my Wonder Women superpowers are gone. I can’t bear to take out the garbage or fix the leak in the kitchen faucet. Pay the bills? Clean out the rotting food from the fridge? No way. I yell at Steve for his lack of support around the house.  
 “Why am I the only one to handle all of the errands and responsibilities around here?” I rant. “I’m tired of dealing with everything on my own. Just me, myself and I. And you haven’t even left yet.”

After the storm, the calm.  
 One week after our fight in the garage, I’m ready to clear the air again. We haven’t discussed the argument. We haven’t had make-up sex.

The tension cuts through the morning, slicing into my breathing space. I shut the cupboard doors harder than I need to.

“Geez, take it easy over there,” he says, stirring his oatmeal.

“I have a ton of things to do today and I’m not on leave, like you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he says.

“It means I don’t get time off from my employer to sort out my admin.”

“Don’t start this again.”

“Start what?” I ask, triumphant that I’ve roused a reaction at last.

“I knew this was coming,” he says, widening his eyes and deepening his voice.

“Well, what do you expect? You haven’t talked to me all week.”

“You know Dan, I’ve been thinking. Maybe you just don’t have what it takes to be an army wife anymore.”

“Well, Steve, maybe I’ve just reached my limit. Aren’t you the one who says everyone has a magic number? Three tours. Four years of marriage. Eight years together. Take your pick.”

“Well maybe you should pack up and leave then!”   
 He’s seen it a hundred times before or more. Sometimes a buddy gets the letter overseas, and sometimes he just comes home to an empty house. This doesn’t only happen in the movies. This happens for real and it terrifies him.

“Why do you always end up saying that? Is that what you really want?” I say, the tears coming again, my wall breached too.

“Maybe it is.”

[linespace]

They say this is normal. It’s in our handbook; *Military Families, Strength Behind the Uniform,* prefaced by soothing words:   
 *“You may find hope and reassurance in this model and the suggested coping strategies, with the knowledge that many others share your responses to this challenging experience.”* This is his, I mean *our* third tour and I’m still waiting for it to get easier. Croatia: check. Bosnia: check. Now Bosnia, again. I find no hope or reassurance in collective suffering.

I slam the front door and jump into my minivan and drive around, unable to reach a destination. I drive through the damp streets, grateful it’s raining. I can’t go anywhere or see anyone. I’m afraid that others will think I’m not coping. I’m petrified that my marriage will be one of the statistics after this tour. Eighty percent of military marriages end in divorce. That’s what the clerks told Steve’s unit during one of their pre-deployment debriefs. Even on a good day, the odds are against us. Finally, I pull into a car dealership parking lot and sob. I let it all out, surprised at how much pain is underneath the fury. After this long, I should have built a thicker skin. I should be able to tolerate this way of life. I’ve done it before. I know what to expect. Maybe that’s the problem. I don’t want my husband to leave for six months for a country that is hurting its own people, where he could be killed while I sit and wait and go on with my day and pray that it doesn’t happen. I don’t feel like holding my breath for the next six months.   
 I’m so tired of living in fear.

“Maybe he’s right, maybe I don’t have what it takes anymore.” I say this out loud, testing the words in the silence of the car. Who can I talk to? Most of the people I know are going through the same relentless progression of emotions; sympathy is hard to find. Too often, the women in my circle lick their own wounds and compare their severity rather than empathize and support one another. This is a myth — there is no support network, not even among the ones who know exactly how it feels.

I don’t know what else to do with myself. Utterly desperate, I start to pray. “You up there — you know I’m not religious. And I’m far from being a good catholic. But I do believe. So I’m asking if you can help me here. I’m scared shitless and I could use some assistance. How am I going to manage this time? I’m so tired. God, I wish you talked back. Well, maybe not, because then I’d just be nuts. A sign would be good. I’ll take that.”   
 I find a used tissue in my purse and blow my nose on a clean corner. I look at myself in the mirror. *God, I look like hell.* I rake through my hair with my fingers.

I remember during the last deployment, while I stood in line at the post office, a little girl saw me like this. I was sending a care package off to Yugoslavia where Steve was deployed for almost seven months. It had been a difficult tour. We were newly married; he left two weeks after our wedding day. I stood in line holding the parcel that was carefully and lovingly packaged with some of his favourite candy bars, books, photos and other surprises. This was before the day of email and digital cameras. Letters could take two months to arrive and the news was always old. Steve would write to me in cursive on blue United Nations envelopes and number each one. Sometimes 22 would arrive before 20 and I’d tear into it, unable to wait to read the letters in consecutive order. He would draw doodles in the margins — hearts with S + D, and mini-portraits of himself with big muscles and captions like, *Tell all boys to stay away from you.* I would send him cards and letters on pretty stationary that took me hours to pick out. So there I stood, holding the package that had taken me a week to prepare. It was an off day, a hard one. No specific reason, just one of those days where I felt the heaviness in my heart. A little girl with blonde curly hair, about eight years old, was staring at me as she stood beside her mother. She was wearing her dance leotard under her winter jacket, with white winter boots that had white pom pom tassels on the ties. I didn’t recognize her; she wasn’t a student from the school where I taught. I would usually smile at a child and make eye contact. But this time, I couldn’t. I was so tired and felt such pressure bearing down on my chest. I didn’t have it in me to force even a smile.

The girl pulled on her mother’s sleeve and whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, “Mom, she’s so sad.”   
 I squeezed the care package against my chest and fixed my gaze to the floor. Everyone turned at once to look at me as I counted the tiles surrounding my feet.

“That’s enough, Hailey,” the mother said. She glanced at me, raising her eyebrows. I flashed a brief, awkward smile. I checked the time on my watch and felt my legs buckle. Sometimes the sadness is so ripe; I swoon with its heavy secret. Even if I try to hide it, children can always sense the truth. I know this as a teacher. They can smell truth like dogs. Usually, I stayed home, hidden from the gaze of others. Weekdays were easier since I was busy with my students. But weekends were for families, and my closest family was a four-hour drive away. Instead, I would stay in bed, hiding under the blankets with a book, quarantined, my sorrow a weakness, a disease nobody wanted to catch, not in this military town.

[linespace]

No divine signs came my way. I drove home slowly from the dealership, manoeuvring through the deserted streets like a drunk driver trying to look sober. My eyes fixed on the road ahead, tunnel vision into the future; I tried desperately to look forward. My face felt dirty, smeared with old makeup. I couldn’t wait to wash my salty tear-streaked-face, scrub off the dirty truth. The sky was lightening just a little in the east as I pulled into the driveway of our white bungalow. Our house was small, a fixer-upper, but it was ours. We put the down payment on it last year, using the money from my final cheque before summer vacation and our collected RRSP contributions. We lived meagrely off of Steve’s military pay all summer, barely making it to September. It was worth it. This little white house and the field that surrounded us was our small piece of heaven, remote from everything military. I opened the door, put the keys on the counter. The house felt empty; the stillness, palpable. The lights were all off and the refrigerator was humming the way it always did at night. Steve’s wallet was on the table: he was home. I hadn’t checked the garage to see if his truck was still there. I walked towards the bedroom, anxious to cleanse my face, wondering what his mood would be. Would the arguing continue or was he just as worn out as I was? I’d been gone most of the night. It was after ten.

I hear him speaking to someone on the telephone. I know it’s not good — I feel it in my stomach.

He hangs up the phone. “Everyone has been moved up by two weeks. We’re leaving Friday.”

“*This* Friday, like five days from today?”

“This Friday,” he answers in his non-negotiable tone. My heart shatters. I search his eyes but the tears don’t surface. I turn and walk to the bathroom. I look at myself in the mirror and scrub my face in harsh circles. I brush my teeth slowly, avoiding the moment when I’ll have to go to bed.

[linespace]

Now I get to look forward to *Phase Two.*

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| ***Phase Two: Emotional Disorganization DURING-DEPLOYMENT*** *(Time Frame: First 6 weeks of deployement.)* |
| ***Common Reactions*** |
| \* Magical thinking – believing the impossible or unlikely  \* Sleep and appetite disturbances  \* Feelings of relief, guilt, anger, numbness, depression  \* Confusion, disorganization, indecision, loneliness  \* Vulnerability, irritability |

Sitting on the edge of the tub, as I floss my teeth and think. Soon, everything will change: my daily routines, my sleeping patterns, my diet. I will eat a bagel for supper while watching TV. I’ll let Molly sleep with me. I will come home every day with shopping bags to fill the hole in my heart. I will keep the radio on, even while I’m away at work to conceal the cold silence when I come through the door.

Steve will become harder to access. He will enter a world I will never truly understand. He will experience war and the affects of poverty and hatred. It will plague his soul, without any time to cope. For six months, our relationship will be put on hold. It will be tested, that’s for sure, but it will not grow. We will grow separately and alone, our relationship will sit unused, like our summer clothes — stuffed under the bed. *“Celebrate the signs of positive growth for both you and your partner.”* Soon I will have to tell him about the leaky roof, the higher tax bill, my grandfather’s death and his aunt’s cancer, all on the phone, during our fifteen-minutes weekly call.   
 “*Try to be as positive as possible in your communications. Don’t just share the problems, but the good news too.”*   
 The delay in the satellite phone will infuriate me: I will speak too fast and we will speak over each other, wasting valuable time. The distance between us will deepen with the echo of our voices over the faulty phone lines. I will try not to cry; try to be strong for him. He has enough to worry about, I will tell myself. I will monitor my watch carefully to try to fit it all in. Sticky notes will sit by the phone with the items I don’t want to forget. Time and time again, we will be cut off, for no reason. Those days will be bad. There will be no closure, just questions. Even worse will be those times I miss his call entirely and hear his voice broken and stuttering, on the answering machine.   
 *Missing a call always causes disappointments that are easily avoidable. Pre-arrange how many and the best times to phone to make the most of your call.”* I know it could be another week before we speak again.This is especially true when the units are deployed in the field. Away from the usual routes, he will not be able to tell me where he is going, what he is doing or when he will be back.   
 “It’s protocol,” he will tell me. “We can’t take any chances, the phones could be monitored.”   
 I will sit on the couch, looking out the large front window and wait impatiently for the small black handset to ring, willing it to ring. Demanding that it ring. Often it will ring at two or three in the morning. I will forget all about the sticky notes.

*“It’s a good idea to confirm the time of your call by e-mail the day before.”*

The loneliness will be difficult to express to the women I work with at school. They will tell me how they wish their spouse would leave for more than a week’s fishing or hunting. They will complain about their husbands over lunch and go home to them every night. I will eat my lunch quickly and go back to my classroom because sometimes being alone is better than being with a lunchroom full of civilians.  
[linespace]

Countdown. Five more days until *Phase Two* begins. My body feels numb. I crawl into bed and spoon Steve. The lights are out and he is facing his usual side. He takes my hands and wraps them tightly around his body. We lie there for a while in silence, both thinking of what is to come. We put behind the hurtful words, which were spoken, and the difficult roles ahead of us. Our dog Molly is sprawled at the foot of the bed, already breaking the rules. Steve turns around and faces me. He kisses my forehead, my cheeks, and then my lips. We fall asleep wrapped together.

Meanwhile, the clerks at CFB Petawawa are in building G-101. They’re sealing the envelopes holding the military-issue handbooks, describing *Phase Two*. I’ve been here before. I’ve already got my copy.

Variable Duration

*More than 2,900 Canadian soldiers, sailors and Air Force personnel are deployed overseas on operational missions. On any given day, about 8,000 Canadian Forces members - one third of our deployable force - are preparing for, engaged in or returning from an overseas mission.*

The sun was shining, not a cloud in the sky. The morning started like all the others: a bowl of Cheerios, a large decaf-double-double and a five-minute drive to the school where I teach. The unimaginable can happen on a day like any other, a gash ripping through the fabric of ordinary life.  
 Shortly after morning announcements, I darted out of my classroom to make an extra photocopy in the teacher’s lounge. Teaching a 4/5 split-grade always had me running for something. I don’t know how some other women wore high heels all day. It was flats or Converse for me. I always felt like a small-town girl, born and raised in a mining town, even when I was in the shoe department. Then again, maybe it was my flat feet that made me so sensible, and not the blue collar that was permanently wrapped around my neck. Roxanne, one of my grade 5 students, needed her work printed on blue paper. She had problems with her vision. The coloured paper made it easier for her read. I raced out to make the copy before she noticed I’d forgotten. I could smell the coffee as I approached the teacher’s lounge at the end of the hall. I breathed in the aroma deeply, knowing it would not touch my lips for some time.   
 “Oh, hi Pauline. You on prep?”  
 “Ya. Listen. Did you hear what happened?” Pauline asked, moving in closer to me. She always had a secret to share, usually about someone else, that so-and-so might soon be going on stress leave or that so-and-so was hoarding all the art supplies. I usually kept my distance.   
 “Hear what?” I asked with a shudder as I caught sight of the worry in her eyes. Was it another death, a roadside bomb, what? At General Lake Public School, almost all the kids and teachers too, were military. She smiled as she said it; her lips thinning and stretching, a painted line.  
 “Two planes just crashed into some government towers in the US. I was in the office when Jim got the call.”   
“What the hell?”

“I know.”

“How did this happen?”

“Nobody knows.” We both stood there, staring at the coffee maker as it finished dripping into the glass pot, making a hush sound. The secretary’s voice on the school intercom snapped us out of our silence.

“Just a reminder the choir is meeting in the library during morning recess. Please do not roam the halls and be on time. Thank-you.”

“I have to get back to class,” I said. Our eyes met as I turned to leave. She was no longer married to Patrick, her ex-husband who was discharged from the army, but she still worried just as much. Some things you can’t divorce. I headed back to my classroom with my hands snuggled against my stomach. I was grateful our baby wasn’t born yet. *Just the size of a peanut and safe inside her Mama*, I thought.

[linespace]

September 11, 2001 was one of the longest days of my teaching career. Yard duty felt like a war zone.

“Curtis, Justin, stop! That’s enough!” I managed to get to them before there was blood. Dishevelled hair and collars stretched out, hanging loosely around their necks. Curtis was close to tears as I approached them on the edge of the baseball field.

“He started this time! He called my dad a wog,” said Curtis pointing to his adversary.

“Did not, I called him a fat wog,” said Justin, smirking through his braces.

“Seriously? Both of you, get to the office now and keep your hands off of each other.”

Most of the older students went home for lunch. They had seen the footage on TV. They came back wired, joking about the end of the world. Teachers in the younger grades hadn’t talked to their students about what had happened in New York City that morning; they still hadn’t made sense of it themselves. But that didn’t stop the kids from hurtling their bodies into each other all day long. The students could feel the restlessness, the anxiety. I raced from one shoving match to another, checking my watch in between clashes, counting the minutes for the bell to ring. I gave up on making them stand to attention like soldiers in proper rows before they entered the school. It was 2:20 in the afternoon and I was ready to go home. We were all unravelling.

[linespace]  
Molly greeted me with her long, feathered wagging tail. I let her out and I immediately turned on the television. I watched people throwing themselves out of the burning building and falling to their deaths, like stuntmen in a disaster movie. The scene just couldn’t be real. Others were covered in white dust, searching for their loved ones, crying into the camera and begging for help to find their family members. Names written on signs and photos squeezed in hands desperately shared on TV. I sat down on the edge of the coffee table and covered my mouth with both hands. The images played and replayed all through the night. The world had changed. I knew it would never be the same. I wanted a drink, something to numb my senses but I had a V8 instead. At least it had kick. I grabbed it from the fridge and hurried back to the TV.

Molly jumped up on the sofa and laid her head on my lap. Steve was still in Bosnia. He’d been there six months already. An extended tour. Lucky us. Steve’s higher rank meant more responsibility. And extra month for us. The end of the rotation was always the worst: so close, yet so very far away. You just held your breath until the plane landed on Canadian soil. Only then did you allow yourself some relief. Now, in the shadow of the collapsing Twin Towers, the home stretch became unbearable. The world was falling apart and I was alone. No family to hold, no one to tell me everything would be all right and no one to help calm my hormonal nerves. No one to reassure me there was still good in the world and that bringing a baby into it was not a selfish act. My closest family— my mom and two younger brothers — were 400 km away, and my Mom had her own kindergarten class to take care of. I was on my own, growing a child inside me, while the world was going to shit. And I couldn’t even have a drink.

I reached for the phone and called Trish. She had been my closest friend for the past three years. She was a transplant, too, from Montreal, and a fellow teacher at the same school on base. Her husband Rick was in Steve’s unitfor a while. Rick was not well liked in the ranks. He was known as a mouthpiece, always playing devil’s advocate no matter what you were talking about. He would even argue for famine, just for the sake of arguing, the king of know-it-alls. Steve put up with him for my sake. I put up with him for Trish’s sake. Even so, there was something I never trusted about him. It wasn’t because he was really good at stealing cable or satellite TV, or because be bought electrical items hot off a truck and would we like to buy one for an awesome price? No. It wasn’t that.

“Trish!”

“Can you believe this?” she said “What the hell is happening?”

“I don’t know.” I laid my hands on my belly, wondering when I would start to show.

“Are you OK? Do you want to come over? I don’t think you should be alone right now.” She was home on maternity leave with her daughter Eva. I missed her so much. Seeing her during the day had always been such a comfort, especially when one of us got a crazy letter from a deranged parent, which was quite often. She was my family in Petawawa – my only family during that time.

“No, I want to stay home, just in case — .”

“He probably won’t call, Dan. I’m sure the phones are all shut down. Rick says — ”

“I know, but, I wouldn’t want to miss it if — .”

“OK, well, call me if you need anything. I’ll send Rick over to get you.”

“No worries. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. But promise me you’ll call us back if you need anything. Don’t be a hero over there.”

[linespace]

I became obsessed with CNN, followed families as they searched for their lost loved ones — a sponge for all the suffering that was happening in our Northern Hemisphere. I could relate to the unknown. I knew what it was like to worry and hope for the best, to push away the worst case scenario from your mind, to wake up in the middle of the night from a terrible dream and pray to God that it was not a premonition and just the fear growing with the darkness. Watching their grief gave my nights purpose as I counted down the sleeps until Steve returned home.

[linespace]  
Work was a welcome routine. My students were dealing with the catastrophe of the terrorist attack, too. A third of them were affected, as I was, by this latest deployment. Mom, Dad, and in one case, both parents gone, even the stepfather, leaving their ten-year-old boy with his grandmother. I knew I had to show up every day for these kids. They were scared — and not of the boogieman under their beds. I was their lifeline and they had become mine. Military kids aren’t like other kids; they are familiar with war and bombs and death. We are not like everyone else. Our safety nets are flawed; our closest family members serve country before family. In those days after 9/11, our classroom became the one thing we could count on.

I checked my email often. I staggered between faking it beautifully and collapsing into full-blown anguish while I waited to hear from Steve.

To tame my nerves, I took Molly for a walk every night, up and down the large hill behind the house. I believed Steve was safe because I would have heard otherwise. No news is good news in the army. Still, I needed reassurance. I needed comforting. I needed to know I was not alone in this big bad self-destructing world.   
 On the fifth day, the phone rang. I knew it was him because of the delay on the phone after I answered.

“Dan, it’s me.”

“Jesus, how are you?”  
 “I’m fine, everything’s fine. They shut everything down after what happened. I couldn’t call but I wanted too.”

“God, it’s so good to hear your voice, I’ve been going through hell over here,” I said, tears streaming down my face.

“I’m sure. I’m so sorry I couldn’t call sooner. How are you? How’s the baby?”

“Fine, we’re fine. Can you believe what happened?”  
 “No. I can’t,” he said in a way that made me abruptly change the subject. I already suspected that this act of war would mean more time away and I couldn’t go there right now.

“Are you still on schedule to come home on October 10? Is that still happening?”

“Ya, still on schedule”

“Thank God. I just want you here.”

“I know — listen, I should go, there’s a huge line up of guys waiting to call home. All their wives are worried too.”

“Already? I said, wiping my wet face with my sleeve. “Try to call back soon and please stay safe.”  
 “I will. I love you, babe. We’re almost there.”

“Me, too,” I said, barely able to get it out. The stress from the week finally hit me in one hard whack. I could finally let go. I hung up the phone and put it back on the charger, tears falling hard and fast. This time I gave in. I dropped onto the couch and forced my face into the cushion. I was so tired of being alone: sick of my own sadness. I let my self-pity spill out into the open. This heartache was too much for Molly, who deserted me as I made space for the pain. I turned on my back and tried to breathe in deeply, feeling guilty for giving into the darkness. I rubbed my belly.

“I’m sorry little one, mama just needed a good cry. Better out than in they say.”

I lay there on the couch and thought about our summer vacation, just a few months before, when the world felt so safe.

I’d flown to Paris to meet Steve for his three-week leave in July. We hadn’t seen each other in almost four months. The whole trip was out of character for us. We were both the type who made lists for everything; things to pack, people to call, things to buy, bills to pay. But on this trip, there were no lists. Just day after spontaneous, unplanned day. We were so lucky his leave landed during my summer holiday. This kind of good fortune was rare in military life. But Bosnia was our third tour: somebody else was at the bottom of the totem pole, not us. We jumped from train to train and visited Florence, Venice and Barcelona all on a whim with our backpacks and Euro rail passes. We picked a city on our map and just went, not bothering with hotel reservations during the busiest month of the year. Somehow, it all worked out. We were never without a place to sleep. Late dinners, litres of wine, walks on the cobblestone streets, hand in hand. We were so carefree. And together, for eighteen consecutive nights.

We made love more on this trip then we had all year long. I felt like a different woman when I arrived in Paris, a more sensual and sexual version of myself. And it wasn’t because of the lavender floral lingerie I had packed. I left the conservative teacher at home and let the adventurous, amorous woman out. I was in the most romantic city in the world and had not seen my husband in four months. We had some making up to do, our young naked bodies were tangled in one another day and night. Every barrier I had ever raised between us was dismantled on that continent, including the catholic girl I carried around deep inside. I was intoxicated by Europe and for once in our lives together; time did not seem to matter.   
 I missed his skin so much, the way it felt against mine. I just wanted him to hold me until I fell asleep in his arms. Instead, I lay on the couch, remembering, and trying to figure out which city our baby was conceived in. I needed to look at the calendar to be sure.

[linespace]

We were still pregnant when Steve returned home after seven months in Bosnia. I picked him up from 3RCR, (The third Royal Canadian Regiment) the building where he worked, on the night of October 10, right on schedule. This reunion was sweeter than all the others. We had made a baby the last time we were together and we hadn’t seen each other since. Molly was the one who was with me when I took the pregnancy test. He loved me more than he did before. I could tell. He was afraid to hurt the baby when we made love that night. He was gentle. We were careful. We had one week of true happiness where he rubbed my belly and talked to the baby with his face squished up against my stomach. We were finally becoming a family after being married four years, a unit of three plus a German Sheppard.

On the seventh day after his return, as I walked down the hall at school, I felt my lower abdomen cramp. It was already past two in the afternoon. I decided to wait for the 3 o’clock bell. Then I drove myself to Emergency. I called Steve to meet me there.  
 “I’m at the hospital,” I said trying to steady my voice.  
 “What happened?”  
 “I’ve had some cramping and I have a bad feeling — .”  
 “I just need to go home and change. I’ll meet you there babe.”  
 “Hurry,” I said.  
 I knew from the look on the technician’s face that something was not right. She showed me the amniotic sac where the baby should have been. She pointed to the screen. A dark fuzzy circle, empty. Our baby had vanished and no one could tell us why.

[linespace]

That night, we cried. Everyone we knew was pregnant, but our child would not be born.We held each other as we lay in bed and grieved. Our hopes and dreams for our little family were shattered. The box of children’s books I’d been collecting for years would remain closed and unread. Steve held me tenderly as I damned the gods for their unjust punishment. The ache I felt in my body was unbearable; the emptiness ricocheted inside me until I ran out of tears and a numbness crept over me like the blackest thickest night. For twelve hours we grieved as a couple. For that one night, at least, our pain was the same.

Steve quickly moved on. He worked long hours. Often, he volunteered for courses that took him away from home. I couldn’t stop crying.  
 “Dan, you need to get busy again. It helps, trust me.”  
 “I just can’t forget like you. I actually feel stuff. I’m not a machine.”  
 I went back to work a week later and I did my best, but my spark was gone. I was a robot spewing out curriculum. And by the time I got home, I just wanted to sleep. I couldn’t get the dark fuzzy circle out of my head; the black hole from the screen was etched inside me like a fossil.

[linespace]

I was admitted for a D&C a few days after the ultrasound because the amniotic sac that housed our baby for fourteen weeks had not left my body naturally. Steve dropped me off and went to work. It was only day surgery, after all. Even so, I was terrified as they put me to sleep. They were about to suck the last bit of my pregnancy away and I was not ready to let it go. I sat up in my paper blue gown and pleaded with the three nurses:

“Please don’t do this. I don’t want you to do this.” I squeezed my stomach as they prepared to shave my pubic hair. Tears covered my cheeks and a blonde nurse with frizzy blonde hair and the roundest blue eyes moved into my sight, directly under the light. She looked like a character from Romper Room or some other kid’s TV show.

“Just lie down dear. You won’t feel a thing,” she said. “This procedure will help you get pregnant again. It cleans everything out, like spring-cleaning. You’ll have many more babies after this,” she said smiling and tucking my hair back into my cap, like she was my fairy godmother. All she was missing was the wand.

I woke up an hour later to an empty room. Another nurse came in and took my blood pressure.

“So, how far along were you, Hon?” she asked, chewing gum.

“Fourteen weeks,” I said not looking at her, my voice low and steady.

“Just long enough to get used to it, eh, and tell everyone about it I’m sure? Oh Hon, you’ll have six more some day, you’ll see.”

She was wrong.

[linespace]

I was one month away from turning 27 when I lost my first baby. I knew I would have been an amazing mom. Instead, I had to continue to be a pseudo-parent for my students and this was just not enough anymore. I started to judge the bad parenting I witnessed: the thoughtless lunches and those that were always unplugged from their kids’ education. I couldn’t bear to see young parents pushing a stroller, especially the teenage ones who smoked beside their babies. Seeing this would send me into a seething rage. Even being around friends with kids was intolerable. I started to withdraw from the world around me. Steve put up with it for a while, until he couldn’t any more.   
 “You seriously need to move on from this,” he said. He’d just come home from another week in the field. It had been almost three months since we lost the baby.  
 “I’m trying Steve, I really am. I’m just not like you.”   
 “I’ve been patient, Dan. Get yourself sorted out. I can’t deal with your shit anymore.”  
 “I can’t help it. I don’t *want* to be sad,” I cried.  
 “Fix it,” he said. I can’t be in a marriage like this.”

[linespace]

I started seeing a counsellor in January. Her name was Dorothy and she wasn’t that much older than me. She was kind but she wasn’t married and she didn’t have children. How could she understand what I was going through?

“I recognize the five stages of grieving. I know I have to go through them all to move on and that it takes time. I’m just really impatient,” I joked. She wrote everything down as I said it, word for word. It drove me crazy but I was not bold enough to tell her so. She would smile as I spoke and often said that I was “so together and that she looked forward to my visits.”

“We could have been great friends, Danielle, if we’d met another way. It’s really too bad.”

Dorothy did tell me that we often accumulate difficult experiences if we don’t deal with them. I was just having a hard time getting back up from these collective hardships, she said.

“You can spend your whole life just trying to get over your childhood,” she said. “Never mind what happens after. Nobody is a shatterproof. This will just take more time.”

I was such a good bullshitter. I wasn’t together at all. I was hurting more than ever. Time wasn’t making anything better.

[linespace]

On a Friday in February, Steve walked through the door after five nights in the field, wearing his army fatigues and carrying his big green duffle bag over his shoulder. We had spoken once that week but it wasn’t for long. I could tell he was disappointed that I was still sounding so down.   
 “Hey, I’m home. I’m going to jump in the shower.”

“OK. How was the rest of your week?” I hollered from the kitchen.

“Hard. It’s so freakin cold at night. I packed a little too light this time. I’ll see you in a bit.”   
 “OK. Just getting supper ready.” I kept my voice perky. I wanted us to have a good weekend. Weekends were all we had.

“So what do you want to do tonight?” he said, his large wet lashes still stuck together, like little stars, the navy towel wrapped around his waist. He could have easily been featured in a Gillette commercial. He was too handsome; the kind of handsome that caused heartache. The kind that always made you worry: tall, dark, muscular and the most beautiful smile.

“I don’t know really, it was a rough week at school. The kids were wild with the snow and all.”

“Well, do you want to go see a movie or something?”

“Maybe. But, I think I might just want to stay home.”  
 “OK Dan, this has seriously got to stop.”

“What?”

“I’m done with you being all miserable and shit. It’s such a downer to come home to a depressed wife after being gone all week. Go outside, get some exercise. You’re not the first woman who has ever had a miscarriage. You need to get over it!”

“There he goes again, Mr. Sensitive. I swear you’re an even bigger ass every time you come back from the field. Are you sure they don’t serve you asshole in those ration packs?”

He shook his head from side to side and walked away, like he always did. And I was left sitting there feeling more alone than ever, like I always did. I left supper on the counter and went to bed hungry while he watched TV and surfed the net. I tried to read but I couldn’t get through a single page. I hated everything about the army when I fell asleep that night. Everything.   
 [linespace]

I woke up and he was already out of bed, an early riser even on weekends.

“Steve can we talk for a minute?”

“*Just* a minute, I’m heading to the gym, so make it fast.”

“Jesus, yes sir,” I snapped.

“Actually Dan, I’m done talking. Get some drugs, or I’m out of here! You’re bringing me down and it’s affecting me at work. I can’t deal with you being fucking depressed anymore. I don’t want to hear it on the phone and I’m sure as hell sick of coming home to it. You have a choice to make.”

[linespace]

Steve came to the doctor’s appointment with me. He had never come before. My doctor knew how I felt about taking the drugs. I was afraid I would become dependent, a fear that was passed down in my family like my curly hair. After I lost the baby and continued to feel depressed, the doctor had recommended some books: *The Conversations with God*, 1 through 3, and *The Celestine Prophecy* to start. He wasn’t an average doctor. When he suggested taking antidepressants to help me get over the hump, I refused. “You wear glasses don’t you? Some people need glasses, Danielle, others don’t. You need glasses.” But, I wasn’t ready then.

The three of us sat quietly while Steve explained that he could no longer deal with my depression. “You need to fix it doc, it’s seriously affecting me and my job. I have a lot of responsibility as a Master Corporal and this has to end today.” The doctor looked at me. I couldn’t say a word.

“Do you want this medication, Danielle?”

I nodded yes as my eyes watered.

“Well it looks like your *problem* will soon be fixed, Steve,” he said as he stood up and patted him on the shoulder. I continued to look at my feet as my doctor strained to make eye contact with me.

“I’m counting on it,” Steve said.

I died a little that day. The hard-core feminist who had co-founded the Women’s Studies Student Association at the University of Ottawa was now barely recognizable. I saw her shadow walking away from me, her curly hair and boot-cut jeans. She looked back as she opened the door in the doctor’s office, holding back her tears as I sat there like a little girl, hands in my lap, scolded for being too sad for too long. I let him shame me. I thought a woman was supposed to love her man more than she loved herself.   
 That’s what my mother always did.

[linespace]

Slowly the dark fog began to lift. Eventually, the heaviness dissipated. But the sorrow was still there. The medication did not make me happy, but it did stop the tears. It made me more tolerable, at least to Steve. This loss didn’t bring us any closer together. For a brief moment, we were united in our heartbreak, but in the end, the gap between us only grew.

Florence, that’s where our baby was conceived. We would have named her Gabrielle, after a street we loved in Venice, when we were both smiling and holding hands and when time stood still.

Yellow Ribbons

*“The yellow ribbon is worn by a woman of destiny who is under a test or trial as she waits for her beloved to return. Will she be true to him?” (16th Century, Puritan Heritage)*

The grey skies hung in contrast to the lemon-colored ribbons that bobbed on the backs of cars and glowed in the windows of local businesses; they fluttered from posts and snow-filled trees that lined the highway. On the road from Petawawa to Pembroke, the message boards of twenty-seven car dealerships welcomed back Roto 0 back: the first official rotation to Kabul. In less than ten days, soldiers would be driving their brand-new vehicles off the lots, bought and paid for with their tax-free danger pay. It was February 2004. The soldiers had been gone for six long months.  
 [linespace]  
Steve had volunteered to leave even before the Afghanistan mission. Twelve days after my emergency C-section he devoted himself to a three-month leadership course in Gagetown. He was on the fast track to moving up the ranks, while I just tried to stay on track.   
 “Can’t you put this one off until next year?” I asked, struggling to nurse the baby, his weight bearing down on my stitches.  
 “Not if I want to get promoted,” he said, lacing up his boots. “They only run it so often. Don’t you think it’s better I leave now, when Owen won’t even notice I’m gone? Better now than when he’s one or two.”  
 “Guess so.” Nothing I could say would change his mind.   
 “I’m doing this for the family,” he said.  
 “What if I can’t do this alone? I’ve never had a baby before.”  
 “Isn’t that what mother’s instincts are for?”  
 “I’ve got no one here Steve and — ”  
 “You have Trish, she’s done this before, and there’s the family resource centre,” he said before leaving for the day.  
 The cold air lingered long after he closed the door. I fed and nursed and changed my son and tried not to cry, but the tears came anyway.  
[linespace]  
Two days after Steve left for the East coast, still recovering from the surgery and learning quickly how to be a single mother, I lugged our cat to the vet. Baby carrier in one hand and animal carrier in the other, at a time when I wasn’t supposed to carry anything.  
 “Just take him,” I said to the young woman at the desk. The cat suffered from a rare form of multiple sclerosis. He was only four, but could no longer make it to the litter box. I pleaded with the veterinarian’s assistant.   
 “What about the cat carrier?”   
 “Keep it,” I sobbed. I had just given birth. I felt like a murderer.  
 I hauled my son in his car seat back home.   
 My stitches split open that week and got infected. Thank God for antibiotics. There was no time for rest: Owen’s colic was starting.  
[linespace]  
Steve visited us once from Gagetown. He’d driven from the East coast to Petawawa with three other guys, twelve straight hours on the road, but he could only stay one night. They had to report in by Monday morning. Steve was sick with a hideous cold and so was Owen. I spent the night in the bathroom, with the steamer on full blast, trying to help our baby breathe. I thought of a story I’d heard about Inuit women who sucked the snot out of their babies’ noses when they were sick. I contemplated waking Steve and making him suck the snot out. Instead, I just sat on the black and white tiled floor, sucking in the steam along with my baby, listening to my husband’s snores.  
[linespace]  
After the leadership course, Steve stayed home long enough to help us move into our new house in Pembroke. We unpacked every single box in less than 24 hours. We weren’t planning to move but our neighbors wanted to buy our home as a ‘guest house’ adjacent to their newly reconditioned farmhouse on its sprawling property. They made us an offer we couldn’t refuse. Luckily, we found another house, a Cape Cod Style home on the outskirts of town. It was further away from base and surrounded by mature trees. A month later, Steve left for Afghanistan: six months. I was diligent about sending him photos through email and tucked into the care packages I made, trying everything I could think of to keep him up-to-date on Owen’s documented development. Owen’s first year in five scrapbooks, to ensure Steve wouldn’t miss a thing. I kept it all together and I was still standing. Mother of the freakin’ year.   
[linespace]  
Then before I knew it, the year was over and Steve was coming back, really coming back. One thing was for sure, having a baby to care for made the time go by faster than being alone. But it wasn’t any easier. I wrote to the school board, asking for two days of paid leave to spend with my husband and son. I needed a couple of days to ease Steve into the routine of fatherhood. Patrolling the streets of Kabul was one thing; taking care of our 13-month-old son was a whole other operation. My letter was solid.   
 “What do you think?” I asked Trish before submitting it.  
 “I think if they say no, they’re the heartless bastards I think they are,” she answered. “Seriously Dan, you made me cry. There’s no way they can refuse this.”  
 Request denied. One day unpaid only. Wouldn’t want to set a precedent.  
 “Wouldn’t want to actually support military families even though they say they do,” I fumed to Trish. “The people who make these decisions have no clue in hell what we go through! How can they when they go home to their own families every night?”   
 We were driving past the school board office. I flipped them the bird.  
 “That’s pretty mature,” she said.  
 “I know. It’s driving me crazy. I can’t help myself.”  
 “Some people will never grasp what we give up so they can sleep tight every night. Don’t let them defeat you.”  
 “OK, Zen master, ” I said.  
[linespace]  
“How many days left Mrs. Fraser? I’m sure you’re counting down,” asked Mrs. McClellan, the Vice Principal of Rockwood Public School where I taught Grade 6.  
 “Nine more,” I said, forcing a smile.  
 “Oh! You must be so excited, especially since the last incident that was on the news? I’m  
sure you just want him home, safe and sound.”  
 “Yes. Have a good day now.”  
 “And you as well, Danielle.”  
 I opened the side door of the van and pulled out the two bags of marking I’d worked on through the weekend. I pulled one onto each shoulder, and then reached into the front for my large double-double. I had already dropped Owen at his daycare, the second since Steve left. The first one hadn’t worked out, even though the woman had great references and I had interviewed her twice, with and without Owen present. I didn’t take it well when she allowed him to be bullied by a five-year-old. The second bruise on his cheek almost made me resign from teaching, until a colleague offered to help. She had a sister-in-law who had an available spot in her home. After meeting her, and crying all the way home with relief, I decided to keep my job, at least for a little while.  
 “Not long now eh, Danielle?” It was Greg, the custodian. The radio was on as usual, a local country station. Greg listened all day long, keeping me up-to-date on the Afghanistan mission, even during my news fasts. He saw the load I was carrying, and waved me on.  
 I opened the door to my classroom and hurried to the front, dropping into my chair to take the first sip of my coffee. It was 8:10 am. I had 45 minutes to get myself ready. As a teacher, I’d always prided myself on being ready the day before, with all the handouts photocopied and my pages bristling with sticky notes. But in the last few weeks, I’d barely kept one step ahead of the kids. As I rifled through the bags looking for my Math exercise books, I felt a jab in my belly again, this one tinged with fear. Would Steve really understand my last e-mail I sent? I’d written it late at night, three days ago, after yet another strained phone call. It seemed we were running out of things to talk about even though we only spoke fifteen minutes a week.   
 “Well, anything new over there?” I asked.  
 “Nothing, Dan. It’s hot and dirty and I can’t wait to get back.”  
 “I’m sure.”  
 “You? I mean, what’s new in Pembroke?”   
 “Nothing. Nothing’s ever new in Pembroke,” I said.  
 “Right. Well, it’s better than being in this filthy place.”  
 “I don’t doubt that.” I paused. “Well, Owen should be waking up soon.”  
 “Make sure you tell him his daddy misses him.”  
 “I will,” I said.  
 “Not much longer, Dan. I know it’s getting old. This is the home stretch.”  
 “I know. Stay safe. We’re counting down with you.”  
 “Love you babe.”  
 “Love you.”  
 This often happened to us at the end of a tour. You start to believe that if you rush through the conversation, you will be that closer being together in the flesh. But after a few of those truncated conversations in the last month and spending most of the year by myself with our infant son, I was desperate to tell him what I was really feeling. I was exhausted: from worrying, from doing it all alone, and from agonizing about the next time he would go away. I had definitely reached my number. Four. Four tours in less than eight years. I couldn’t pretend any more as we talked over the satellite phone with the delay making our separation palpable. He left me for nine months with a newborn. I was done sucking it up. I no longer had the energy to explain to him how much Owen was growing and changing every day. I was tired of experiencing every milestone by myself. I resented being alone, I resented him, despite the pride I felt for what he was doing. I knew Steve was making a difference in Afghanistan, but somehow, that was no longer enough. Not even close.  
 “What’s with you today?” Trish asked when I met her in the hall.  
 “Nothing. Same shit, really,” I said.  
 “He’s still coming home next Wednesday, right?”  
 “Ya, but I’m not going to sleep till he gets his ass home.”  
 “He will.”  
 “From your mouth to God’s ears.”  
 “Why don’t you and Owen come over for dinner tonight? Rick’s in the field for a couple of days. It’s just me and the kids. It’ll do you some good to eat with someone.”  
 “I’m not alone, I have Owen.”  
 “Sure you do, but I mean grown-up talk, we could all use that. Don’t isolate yourself. Don’t forget I have the t-shirt too, three of them, and counting.”  
 “Yup. The men get medals and we get t-shirts, wrinkles and grey hair. How’s that fair?”  
 “Come over, we’ll put a pizza in the oven and make a salad. OK?”  
 “Sounds good.”  
 At least one other person on staff knew the reunion would not be all ice cream and cherries. It wasn’t anything like what they depicted on the news with the tacky music and hugs all around. A few other military spouses taught at the school, but none of them were infantry wives. Their husbands weren’t gone as much as Steve and Rick. Only Trish knew how much time I spent alone. They called us *Field Widows* for a reason.

[linespace]   
I pulled into Trisha’s driveway, which looked like it had been cut out of a snow block. I was getting tired of plowing mine with our 4-wheeler after I put Owen to sleep. It was only February; the snow would fall for a long while yet. Trisha’s husband was exempt from this tour because he’d just had knee surgery. He wasn’t happy about it: no one wants to be the guy left behind. And he was missing out on the danger pay, which would have financed the garage he wanted to build. In the months Steve was away he’d recovered enough to go on three-day training exercise. I wondered what kind of injury it would take to keep Steve home.  
 “Look who’s here you guys, it’s Danielle and Owen!”  
 Trish’s kids stood at the top of the stairs waiting for us to take off, our boots and jackets. Eva was 3 and Ethan was only 12 months.   
 “Come on in, supper’s in the oven. Give me the little guy.” I handed him off still in his snowsuit, hat and mitts. “This kid’s a giant! Steve’s going to be shocked when he sees how much he’s grown.”   
 “I know. They miss a lot, don’t they?”   
 “More than they’ll ever know,” she said wrinkling her brow.  
 “Do you think if they did, if they really did know how much they missed, they would still choose to go?” I said hanging up my jacket.  
 “Well, we all know that at least half of them are told to go, but the other half I think would be split down the middle. One half would probably stay, but the other half would still be lining up. We all know who *those* guys are,” added Trish, quickly covering her mouth with her hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”   
 “No, I know, but you’re right,” I said.  
 “It’s not a bad thing, it’s an honourable thing. We need people who are loyal to the cause,” she said, sitting Owen in front of the heap of toys in the living room.  
 “It just sucks when that person is your husband and was born with DNA that predisposes him to being the poster boy for the God-damned army.”  
 “I invited you over to take your mind off of things, not to stress you out,” she reminded me.  
 “It’s OK. You’re right, Steve *would* volunteer to go. He’s that guy. That’s why I sent him an email a few days ago. But, I still haven’t heard anything from him yet.”  
 “What did you say?”  
 “It was *the* email, Trish. The one you should never send to your husband overseas.”  
 “Holy shit Dan, not a Dear John letter?”  
 “No, the other one. The one that says I’m so sick and tired of being sick and tired and when will this come to an end?”  
 “Oh. That one. What do you think he’ll say?”  
 “I know exactly what he’ll say. The part I’m not sure about is what I’m going to do about it. I could have answered the email myself. I’ve known him seven years now and I’m sure Afghanistan hasn’t changed him that much. It will read:  
 *Dan you knew when you married me that I was in the military. It’s what I love. I have worked too hard to get to where I am to quit now. This is all I know and I’m good at it, not too mention I’m serving my country dammit! If you are too weak to be an army wife, you know where the door is. Don’t give me an ultimatum or you’ll lose. I know marriages don’t always last in the army. I see it every day. Do what you have to do.*   
 “That’s a little harsh,” she said, twisting her wedding ring on her finger.  
 “That’s my reality. You know him. He’s a lifer. It’s up to me to be the bad guy if I want  
things to change.”  
 “Well maybe this time will be different. If anything can transform a person, it’s a baby.”  
 “I don’t know. I hope to God a shift has happened because I know in my heart I’m done. I’m tired of living a life alone, of raising a child on my own. I’m tired of dreading holidays and birthdays because it’s just one more without Steve. Life’s too short to spend it alone.”  
 “I know it’s not easy, but doesn’t teaching keep your mind off things? At least we have jobs. I can’t imagine how all the wives cope who stay home all day.”  
 “Teaching used to be enough. Not any more. It’s not just the tours. What about all the training: weeks, no months in the field? That will never change. And the part that completely sucks is that I still love him so damn much, Trish.”  
 “I know you do.”  
 “But, I think I’ve finally reached a point in my life where I believe I deserve to be happy and supported too. He’s not the only one with goals and dreams you know! I’m sorry, I’m getting so worked up.”  
 “It’s OK, I get it.”   
 “Everything’s on hold when he’s gone. It’s bad enough Daddy’s gone, I feel so guilty every time I leave Owen with a sitter since he’s already with a sitter all day when I’m at work. There will always be another course, another tour, and another situation where the army needs Steve and only Steve because of his bleeping qualifications. They brainwash them, Trish. They make it seem like he’s the ONLY guy for the job and that if he doesn’t do it, he’s letting down the whole goddamn country! Enough already. When will he realize that he’s just being used?”  
 “I swear they put something in their food,” she said.  
 “I wouldn’t be surprised one bit,” I said. “Can you believe *The National* wants to film our reunion? They called me last week. It’s one thing to get footage of Steve in Afghanistan and me at home with Owen, that, I agreed to, but now they want to end it with the perfect Hallmark moment by sticking a camera in our faces after six months apart. Seriously?”  
 “What did you say?”  
 “I said no. Hell no! And Steve agreed. He said he doesn’t want to be on national news either after being on a stupid plane for two days.”  
 “Well thank God for that. Those freaking people need to spend a year with us to see what it’s really about. If only it was just one happy reunion after another.”  
 “Exactly. They’re not getting their two-minute feel-good segment from this family. Go find another sucker.”  
 By the time I got home, there was yet another layer of new snow to plow.   
 “Well Owen, Mama is not ploughing the driveway tonight. We are going to bed.”   
 I lifted him out of his car seat. He was sleeping heavily and weighed a ton. I grabbed his bag and shut the van door with my foot, unlocked the front door while balancing a twenty-pound baby and two bags and pushing a dog indoors with my feet. Cirque du Soleil has nothing on me. I kicked off my boots and climbed the stairs, changed Owen’s diaper and put him to bed without even turning the lights on.   
 “Sorry for getting home so late, Molly. I just needed some girl time,” I said as I dished out her bowl of food. She was scarfing it down before it hit the floor. I gave her some fresh water, let her out the back, then checked the computer.  
 E-mail inbox: three. My heart thumped so hard I could feel it in my throat. I clicked the inbox, scanning for his email. It wasn’t there. Nothing but junk mail. I turned off the computer and went straight to bed. I was too tired to feel anything. My sleep that night was deep and heavy, a child’s sleep.   
[linespace]  
The next morning I woke up before Owen and hurried downstairs to the computer without even making coffee. I slumped myself over the black swivel chair and tapped impatiently on the desk as it booted up.   
 Open dammit.   
 And there it was. Inbox: Steve Daniel. I felt nauseous, like I could have passed out sitting down. Would this just all blow up in my face? I knew he already had abandonment issues of his own, and not only from what he had witnessed in the army. He had told me once, that his own mother threatened to give him away when he was a little boy. Multiple times. I double-clicked the inbox:  
*Dan,*  
*I read your e-mail, and I just can’t get into this right now. You could have waited until I got back to discuss this. I’ll be home in just over a week.*   
*Steve*  
 I stared at the screen. Rage rose from my feet to my forehead. Three measly sentences? He always managed to make me feel unreasonable when I was at my breaking point. Asshole. Fucking asshole! It doesn’t matter how I feel, he will always do what he wants.   
 I had become my mother’s daughter after all. From a small town in Northern Ontario, French Father, Métis Mother, brown hair, almost black, brown eyes, lets men take advantage of her big heart.  
 On cue, Owen started to wail.   
 “Another day”, I whispered to myself, tears of fury spilling down my cheeks as I ran up the stairs three at a time to pick up my boy and get him ready for the day. “I’m a fucking robot.”   
 I kissed his wet cheeks and did what I did every day but this time, my wretchedness was caked with anger, anger that I had never allowed myself to express around the baby. I wanted to curl up in bed and pull the blankets over my head. I couldn’t bear any more platitudes or well-wishes. “How do you think I feel, moron? I am barely holding on. I’m tired and terrified and heartbreakingly lonely. It’s dirtballs like you who keep asking me how I am and how I do it everyday that keep me lying to myself. But guess what? It’s bullshit. I feel like I’m dying. I’m worried out of my mind that my husband will come home in a body bag and that my son will grow up without a father. I don’t want to pretend for one more day, not even one more minute. I have nothing left to give, to you, to my students or to myself, but I keep going because I have no choice.”   
 I got out of the van and slammed the door, balancing my coffee and my marking bag, once again. I wanted to rip off the magnetic yellow ribbon stuck on my door and toss it into the traffic.  
 “Oh, good morning, Danielle, how are you today?”  
 I glared at my VP and smiled. “Fine,” I said. “I’m just fine.”   
 Pick up son. Check. Supper. Check. Laundry. Check. Bath time. Check. Schoolwork. Check. I was making it through my day but something was different. I was slowly cracking, the way a drinking glass eventually does after too many cycles in the dishwasher. The glass is cracked but it still holds milk. You know it’s going to break soon, but you keep using it until it falls apart, in pieces.   
[linespace]  
I woke up and looked at the clock. Owen was still sleeping. Oh, thank-you God. It was early, 5:30 am. Steve would be coming home tomorrow. I thought I was going to be sick. I ran to the washroom, not knowing if I would throw up or shit. My stomach was a mess. I flushed the toilet. I saw myself in the mirror, but it wasn’t the person I once knew. The woman in front of me looked depleted. Her eyes were not darkened but there was a lingering sadness that sat like foul water in a swamp. I washed my face and patted it with the floral hand towel and left it on the floor as it fell off the towel rack. I wondered where Steve was at that moment. I knew he had already left Afghanistan because it took two days to get home. Maybe he was in Germany, Dubai, or Tim-Buck-Two? He was decompressing is all I knew, unable to give me his location, which was code for ridiculously drunk and stupid. The army’s way of getting the guys ready to come home to their families.   
 I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of hot coffee in my hands, and thought of how Shorty’s wife was feeling at this time. He’d been blown up by a roadside bomb in an Iltis jeep, just one month after the men arrived in Afghanistan. Two soldiers had died in that explosion, both from base Petawawa. Steve had to go out and patrol the following day in the same unprotected jeep, near an area where Shorty had been killed. He missed the ramp ceremony and didn’t get a chance to say good-bye. He didn’t want to talk about it when he called home. I wondered if he’d talk about it once he settled in. Steve’s trailer was across from his; they had spoken the morning before he was killed. And his wife, waiting like me, for the rest of them to come home. Except that her husband would never come home to her again. I wondered if she would live in a perpetual dream, hoping he would just show up one day on her doorstep.  
 I counted my blessings, despite my broken heart. I knew others were hurting more than me. I held gratitude in my heart for keeping my husband safe. Owen still had his Daddy.  
[linespace]  
The next day, I drank a whole pot of coffee at school after my usual large double-double. Finally, I was coffeed out, but I didn’t have another vice to get me through the last couple of hours of teaching. Trish came to visit me during the final recess, knowing I would be bouncing off the walls.   
 “Well hello there Mme. Fraser, how are you holding up?”  
 “I’m going mental! I don’t know how I’m going to get through the next couple hours.”  
 “Well, after a total of nine months apart this year, I’m sure you can wait until 8:30 tonight.”  
 “Funny one.”  
 “Did you sleep last night?”  
 “Barely.”  
 “You should have gotten drunk. I could’ve come over.”  
 “I did manage three glasses of wine. It goes down pretty fast while you’re mopping the floors.”  
 “Well good for you. A little buzz doesn’t hurt while you’re housecleaning,” she said with a wink.  
 “So, have you decided what you’ll wear tonight?”  
 “My baby blue fitted turtleneck.”  
 “Sweet.”  
 “Up or down?”  
 “Down and curly.”  
 “Sounds perfect to me. Steve will have his hands all over you before you even get in the door.”  
 “We’ll see… it feels like forever this time Trish. Really. Forever.”  
 “You guys will find your groove again. Give it a couple of days. You’re strong, Dan.”  
 “I hope so.”  
 “You just need to shut out the rest of the world right now. Are his parents coming up?”  
 “Not for at least a couple of weeks. I spoke to them last night.”  
 “Well, that’s good. I swear Greg’s parents would sleep right between us if they could.  
They never give us space when he gets back. They’d be at the building waiting with me. It’s weird enough, be happy that it’ll just be you and Owen, and no national news.”   
[linespace]  
I could barley eat supper. Owen was unaware of the big event. He was content throwing noodles on the floor. I kept telling him that he would be seeing his Daddy soon, but all he would say is “daddy soon, daddy soon.” Owen had celebrated his first birthday the month before. I tried to make up for Steve’s absence by inviting every mother and baby I knew. Twelve babies on one couch made for an interesting first birthday photo. I was so excited for my two boys to see each other again. I wanted a drink to help calm my nerves but knew I had to drive to 3 RCR. I would have to get through the restless two hours without the MASI red wine sitting on the countertop. I washed and dried the dishes and put them away. I usually let them dry in the rack, but I needed to stay busy. I wiped my hands on the apple green dishtowel I bought the week before and went upstairs while Owen played in his playpen. I brushed my teeth and changed into my blue turtleneck, took my hair down from my clip and flipped my hair over, spraying it lightly with hairspray. I put on cherry lip-gloss, smacked my lips, blotted them with toilet paper and tossed it in the garbage. I misted my neck and wrists with perfume, the one Steve bought for me in England when he did the Cambrian Patrol – brought home a silver medal. I looked at myself in the mirror and tried to give my hair more volume by shaking it through my fingertips. Then, I turned around and checked out my butt in my jeans. This is as good as it gets. I still had not lost all the baby weight I was planning to lose while Steve was gone. Would he be disappointed when he saw me?  
 I peed one last time before bundling up Owen for the ride into Petawawa. “OK buddy, it’s show time. Let’s go pick up your Daddy.   
 “Daddy soon”, he replied.   
 “Yes Owen, Daddy soon.”  
 I strapped him into his car seat and wiped the snow off the windshield with my bare hand. I blasted the heat and buckled myself in, turning the radio to CBC. They were talking about whether or not Canada should be in Afghanistan. I flicked it off, inhaled deeply and breathed out slowly as I backed out onto the road.   
 As I pulled up to the intersection right before the base, I saw a tank sitting in the snow along with a lighted sign that said *Welcome Home Roto 0*. Yellow ribbons flanked both sides of the intersection, flapping in the cold winter wind. It was 7:30 at night but even so, there was a lot of traffic. Steve wouldn’t arrive for another hour, but I was always early for everything. There was no way I would be late for this. I pulled through the entrance under the sign *All Visitors Must Check In.* The gate was not supervised and displayed a perpetual green light. My heart fluttered and I took another deep breath, exhaling as I passed through. I hated driving onto base. It always made me nervous. I remember many family days where that same uneasiness flooded my body as I drove through the small maze of concrete buildings. Being here reminded me that we weren’t in control of our lives — we were the puppets and the men with more stripes were the puppeteers. A person didn’t want to step outside the lines here.   
 I pulled into the Y-101 parking lot. “This is where your Daddy works Owen.”   
 The parking lot was still fairly empty. I parked close and got Owen out of his car seat.  
 “OK big boy, Daddy will be here soon.”   
 “Daddy soon.”   
 I heaved him into my arms and sheltered his face against the cold. Walking into the large cement building made me queasier than driving onto base. Soldiers wearing black boots and camouflage rushed around with clipboards. Younger privates and corporals were setting up tables with Tim Horton’s coffee and timbits for the kids, fruit juice and bottled water.   
 I poured myself a coffee, the 15th of the day? I knew how long this last hour would feel. Other wives and kids started to pile in; some with three kids wearing their pajamas all anxiously awaiting their Dads and Moms. You could always tell who the newlyweds were: all done up and childless, staring into space blindly, very close to vomiting and unsure how they made it through their first six months without their loved one. I smiled at one of the girls. She was blonde and very pretty. She smiled back, meekly. I looked at her, feeling sorry for her and then felt guilty. I knew it was just the beginning. Now, even after my fourth tour, it wasn’t any easier. She wore her yellow ribbon on her jacket collar, a brown tweed wool winter coat. It made me think of Brown-Eyed-Susans. I didn’t bother pinning mine anymore. I didn’t have to. The yellow ribbons were permanently wrapped around me, a tight corset.  
 I turned my attention to Owen who was sitting in my lap and already falling asleep. ”My little angel,” I whispered. “Maybe we’ll all sleep better now that your Daddy’s home.”   
 I looked at my watch. Thirty minutes to go.   
 “Oh, hi, Danielle, right”?  
 “Yes, you’re Fitzpatrick’s wife?”  
 “Yes, Shelly.”  
 “We met at the Christmas mess dinner last year,” I said.  
 “Yup, that was me, we were both pregnant then,” she said.  
 “That’s true. I was huge, with less than a month to go,” I said. “You had a girl, right?”  
 “My third.”  
 “Wow. Do you think you’ll try again? For a boy I mean?”  
 “Oh, who knows what Sean will want. Before he left he said that was it for us. But you never know, he said the same thing before Bosnia.”  
 “Well thanks for keeping this country populated,” I said.  
 “You’re off to a good start. What a beautiful boy you have there. Will you have more than one?”  
 “That’s the plan.”  
 “I prefer even numbers myself,” she said. “I can’t wait for those boys to finally get here. This one wasn’t like the others.”  
 “Nope,” I said, shifting Owen’s weight in my arms.”  
 “So, have you heard about Smitts and Farrell? Their marriages didn’t make it,” she said.  
 “I did. The Hunters, too.”   
 “I heard Hunter’s wife ended up with a master corporal from the Q’s.”  
 “Geez. I hadn’t heard that,” I said.  
 “PMQ gossip, sadly. I think we’ll see a lot more break-ups after this rotation,” she said.  
 “You might be right,” I said biting down on my lower lip.  
 I looked towards the doors where people were still coming in. The energy in the building was not jovial, not full of excitement. It was heaviness mixed with trepidation and relief, cracked hearts and uncertain futures. As much as these wives looked composed with their perfectly coiffed hair and painted lips, I knew the truth. Afghanistan was a battle that affected us all.  
 “They’re here! They’re here!” I heard from the other end of the hall.  
 “My God! Since when are they early?” I said.   
 “This is a first,” said Shelly.   
 I wanted to puke, I was so nervous, so excited, so unbelievably relieved. People started pushing towards the front of the room. I stood back and took a deep breath and held it. I pressed Owen against my chest, feeling the warmth of his reliable body against mine. The men poured in with their bags on their shoulders and their eyes searching, scanning the room for their loved ones. Some of them had huge smiles across their faces despite the loss they experienced. Some came in averting their eyes, looking over everyone’s heads. Others were unable to soak in the welcome; it was obvious they would not return home after all. Afghanistan is where they would stay.   
 I swayed my weight from one foot to another, holding Owen in my arms and scanning the entrance for my handsome husband. I thought of a story I heard about the young girl who ran after the bus when Steve left on his first tour. She ran after them screaming *Noooooo!* *Noooooo!* I thought she was crazy, then. Weak. Now I could see myself doing the same.   
 Come on…come on…where is he?  
 Just then, I saw him walk into the hall, tall and just as striking as I remembered. Even more. He’s home. I pushed my way against the crowd, towards him. He hadn’t seen us yet, but his eyes were still full of life. Oh, thank God. Maybe we’d be one of the lucky ones. I tried to squeeze through the husbands and wives and kids reuniting, hugging and kissing. I made it past the newlywed I had seen earlier. The young pretty blonde girl was now crying, weeping in her husbands’ arms. Owen was tightly wrapped inside mine. Then there he was, right in front of me, alive and well.   
 “Hey, there you are,” he said. His bright smile made me feel like a schoolgirl again. I blushed.  
 “Hey, you, how was the journey home?” I asked as he hugged us both with his rucksack still on his shoulder.   
 “Long. The longest trip home yet. Let me take a look at my big boy,” he said as he took Owen out of my arms.  
 “He just woke up.”  
 “Right on time eh little man?”  
 My heart was pounding. I felt euphoric for the first time since bringing my son home from the hospital, over a year ago. My eyes teared up as I watched them, now face to face.   
 “Daddy’s home Owen. Did you take care of your mom like I asked? I think you did a good job. Your mom looks very pretty,” he said turning his gazing to me and smiling. He kissed me on the lips and for once I believed – really believed – that all was well in the world.   
 “Hey man, good to be back eh?” a soldier said as he patted Steve on the back.  
 “I want you to meet Jr. here,” he said.  
 “How old is he now?” Steve asked.   
 “Four months old man. He’s gonna be a looker like his Dad,” he laughed.   
 “Ya right, more like his Mom. Your face is like a rubber boot and this kid is cute.  
 “Congratulations. Really, I’m happy for you.”  
 “Thanks man. How old is your little guy?”   
 “Just turned thirteen months,” I said.  
 “Jesus Murphy, I thought he was two years old! That kid’s going to be a beast like his old man.”  
 “You got that right, he’s going to be a crusher!”  
 “We should get together for some drinks one night, with the women too.”  
 “Ya sure, give me a call when you get settled in.”  
 “All right brother, take care. I’m going to get myself a Tim Horton’s triple-triple.”  
 “Later.”  
 “Well Babe, just let me clear out of here and we’ll go home. Sound good?”   
 “Sounds great.”  
 Steve handed me the baby and headed to the receiving line, where a row of doctors and counselors were checking in the troops. We followed. It was the last step before letting the soldiers go home. The last official piece of business.  
 “Welcome home Sergeant Daniel,” said a portly medic. “How you feeling?”  
 “Great,” Steve answered.  
 “Good to hear. You must be tired?”  
 “A little, but it’s good to be home.”  
 “Must be.”  
 “You ever been on tour Corporal?” Steve asked.  
 “Not yet Sergeant. Hope to be on Roto 3.”  
 “Good.”  
 “According to the paperwork you had a mole removed while you were overseas Seargent. Any problems since then?”  
 “None.”  
 “Very good, well that’s all for tonight. You’re cleared here. You just need to talk with the doctor next.”  
 “Right.”  
 “Welcome home Sergeant,” the doctor said as he shook Steve’s hand.  
 “Thank-you, Sir.”  
 “It must feel good to be back on Canadian soil after that tour.”  
 “Sir, yes sir.”  
 “Well soldier, you know the drill. This isn’t your first deployment.”  
 “No sir.”  
 “Any problems sleeping while you were in Afghanistan?”  
 “None.”  
 Check.  
 “Any anxiety or stress that is out of the norm, Sergeant?”  
 “None sir.”  
 Check.  
 “We lost some good men, great soldiers during this rotation. Anything you need to talk about soldier?”  
 “No sir. I’m fine. Can I go home now?”  
 “Yes Sergeant Daniel, you’re cleared. You need to report back day after tomorrow at 09:00hrs.”  
 “OK, thank-you sir.”  
 “Welcome home,” said the doctor as he looked at us both. Steve walked out of the assembly line quickly, saying good-bye to the men he’d spent the last six months with. “See ya around guys. Don’t go spending all your money in one day.”   
 “Right,” yelled out his buddy Jimmy. “The wife’s already spent that money! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do tonight.” Laughs and whistles filled the room.  
 “Ya ya, I’ll see you guys around. I can’t say I’ll miss any of you.”   
 “All set?” I asked.  
 “All done babe. I’m officially off military clock.”  
 “Good, let’s go home.”  
 We walked into the dark night with the wind howling.   
 “Yikes it’s cold out here,” he said putting his arm around me. “Looks like there’s enough snow for snowmobiling this year. Maybe Daddy’s gonna buy one after all, Owen.” Steve said as he strapped our son in.   
 “Do you want me to do that Steve?”  
 “No, I think I got this.”  
 I sat in the driver’s seat and buckled myself in. Steve sat on the passenger side and pushed the seat back, making room for his long legs.   
 “You must be so tired.”  
 “I’m getting there. Been up almost 48 hours straight.”  
 “You didn’t sleep on the plane?”  
 “No, some of the guys kept us up all night.”   
 “Well, you’ll be able to get some rest now. That is, until Owen wakes up.”  
 “So, what time does my little guy wake up these days?”  
 “Around 6:30. But he sleeps through the night now. Thank God. Ever since I stopped nursing at six months.”  
 “He’s grown so much. I really can’t believe how much he’s changed. Do you think he knows who I am?”  
 “Of course he does. I show him pictures of you every day. And I’ve been showing him the video you made before you left.”  
 “Good. Thanks, Dan.”  
 We both stared out the windshield. Small snowflakes hit the glass, instantly turning into water.   
 “Almost home.”  
 “It will be nice to sleep in my own bed again.”  
 “I need to get used to sharing it again.”  
 “I can sleep on the couch if you’d be more comfortable.”   
 We both looked at each other and laughed.   
 “I’m sure I’ll adjust,” I said.  
 I pulled into the driveway.   
 “Wow, I can’t believe the snow you guys have had this winter.”  
 “Tell me about it.”  
 “I see you’re getting the hang of the plow.”  
 “The neighbor’s only had to save my ass a few times when I got stuck.”  
 “I’ll have to look at the winch tomorrow.”  
 “It’s fine. Trust me.”  
 He untied his boots and put them on the rubber mat. Molly jumped on him, whimpering with joy. The house seemed in good enough order. The fridge was still humming. He had tried to fix it before he left but I told him that didn’t last long. I always said I married handsome over handy. I brought Owen upstairs, changed his diaper and put him to bed while Steve looked around the house.  
 He grabbed a glass from the cupboard and turned on the tap. Drinking water from the tap was something he hadn’t done for a long time. He helped himself to the banana bread I had made him and headed upstairs. He went to check in on Owen.   
 “My God, my son is so big, he’s perfect,” he said as he softly rubbed his head. Steve kissed him goodnight and turned to me, putting his hands on my shoulders.  
 “Are you sure you don’t want me to sleep on the couch? I’m used to sleeping on a crappy mattress.”  
 “Very funny. Just take a shower and wash off your cooties.”  
 “Yes ma’am.”  
 I lay in bed and prayed: thank you God. My family is finally together. Tears started rolling down my cheeks, wetting my pillow. I was so relieved, but still uneasy, too. There was so much to show Steve to make sure Owen would stay on his routine and I only had a day to explain it all. I wanted to bring Owen to day care this week and let Steve rest but he refused. He didn’t want someone else spending the day with his son after he had missed so many days already.  
 “What do you think? Do I look like a beast or what?” he said as he stood there flexing his muscles in a short towel. “Six months of iron, baby,” he said as he slapped his bicep.  
 “You look good, babe. Actually you just keep getting more and more good-looking. It’s not fair.”  
 “Well you look beautiful too my love, more beautiful than I remembered.”  
 “What does that mean exactly? You thought of me for six months as an ugly duckling?”  
 “No! I just mean you’re also beautiful. I missed your big moon face and your lips and these too…” he said as he grabbed both my breasts.  
 “Oh, so you think you already earned your way there, do you?”  
 “I think so. I’ve been a very good boy. Have you been a good girl?”  
 “Always. I’m always a good girl.”  
 “I love you Dan. More than ever, I really do,” he said as he looked right into my eyes.  
 “I love you too,” I said.   
 I loosened the yellow-ribbon stays and gave myself to him once more.   
I was true, just like I was supposed to be.

D DAY  
  
I’m sitting in the back of a mid-sized-car. There’s a driver in the front, a Corporal. He’s young and has a Spanish accent. He’s also polite and knows my husband well, which is why he volunteered to drive me. I can tell he’s nervous. His driving is jerky and he breaks suddenly and often. In the backseat beside me is JR, Steve’s best friend. He was the first person I thought to call. I’m looking out the window, watching the cars zip by us, filled with camping gear for the long weekend — happy people going to happy places. I’m in the back seat of a military-issue-car, while my eighteen-month-old son is still at the babysitter, well past his dinner. I have never left Owen for more than a day and now I’m leaving him for more days than I’ll be able to remember and he doesn’t even have enough diapers. We’re driving to Kingston, the biggest hospital closest to where the sky fell.  
[linespace]  
I stashed away my tarot cards while Steve served in Afghanistan. Some things you just don’t want to know ahead of time. But once he returned home, I pulled them out of the bedside drawer where my favourite books and journals are stockpiled.  
 “There she goes again with her voodoo stuff.”  
 “It’s not voodoo, they’re *Celtic Wisdom Cards*.”  
 “Nothing wise about those cards or the people who use em.”   
 “Don’t worry, I stopped poking pins in your doll years ago.”  
 “Whatever, Dan. Seems like a big waste of time to me.”  
 “Why don’t you go polish your motorcycle again?”  
 When I was twelve, my babysitter taught me how to read with a regular playing deck. Carolyn was in her early twenties and had long black hair and glasses. She told me she was psychic and that her mother was, too.   
 “You can use this to spy on your boyfriends,” she said. “The black suit warns you of a dark-haired girl and the red suit warns you to a light-haired girl. Depending which way they face, you know whose looking at who. The cards never lie, no matter what your boyfriend says.”  
 After the cards, we moved on to palms.  
 “OK. The first thing you need to know is that your left hand is your past and your right hand is your future,” she said, bringing my right palm up under her nose.  
 “Wow! You have a lot of worry lines for such a young’un. It’ll get better Sweetie. I promise,” she said as she pushed my bangs off my forehead.  
 “I know,” I said, shaking my head a little to move my hair back to where I liked it.  
 “Now, let’s move on to how many children you’ll have,” she said grinning.  
 Later, I used the palm-reading skills at parties, but only when I was feeling really good. It became my barometer for how drunk I was, the way some people smoke and then regret it in the morning.  
 I always thought that Steve disapproved of me practicing the tarot because he, too, somehow sensed the looming day that would alter us. Or maybe it was just the fanatical fundamentalist Christian authority he grew up with. His parents would never approve of such *sinful cards*. Even playing Crazy Eights could lead to the devil.  
 After Steve was back from Afghanistan, there was one card in particular that revealed itself over and over when I did my three-card draw. A blue man was painted on the front of this card and he was holding lightening in one hand that caused a tiny person to fall out of a bowl that had flipped over. The little man was falling upside down while the blue man held both hands up like he was trying to scare me. It was called The Changer, and it was defined as:  
 *Complete and sudden change. Alteration of the world as one knows it. Shocking or traumatic incident. Old habits overthrown. Breakdown. Routine destroyed. Revelation. Clarifying or cleansing event. Humility.* I would often redraw a three-card spread with the blue man already sitting on the table. I tried to ignore him, but he kept coming back. I made myself believe good change was coming, like the posting to Trenton that we both wanted.  
[linespace]  
After Steve returned safely home from Afghanistan, I started to crumble. Slowly at first, until I could no longer brace the weight of it all. The thick and towering wall I had built to help me cope through Afghanistan, the last seven years of marriage, and all the years before that, was collapsing, threatening to crash me. I could not contain the landslide of pain that came plummeting down with it. Afghanistan had been my final challenge before I became undone.  
 Worry lines never lie either.  
[linespace]  
I can smell the booze on JR. He was already celebrating Canada Day. July 1 is like the Super Bowl for the military, and the pre-show had begun. His face is red from being in the sun all day and he is still wearing his combats, the same ones Steve wears every day.  
 JR is one of those guys who is always getting himself into trouble, like Dennis the Menace. Always goading the limits, letting his wild and curly hair grow well past the appropriate military length, getting in fights with troops and breaking all his toys. Loud and offensive, he has always known how to push my buttons. The fact that I am a Women Studies graduate has made me a very easy target.  
 “Hey Dan, did Steve tell you about the strippers we hung out with in Ottawa?”  
 “Shut-up JR.”  
 “Dan, these girls were ve-ry naughty.”  
 “Seriously JR, how can you talk like that when you have a daughter?”  
 “Don’t worry, she’ll be getting her own pole on her sweet sixteen.”  
 “God, you make me sick.”  
 This exchange went on for years, until I learned to stop encouraging him. Despite his flaws, he was the kind of guy you could count on and Steve respected him for that. They were brothers.  
 “How you holding up?”  
 “I just hope I can keep it together when I see him.”  
 “You will Dan.”  
 “But what if? I bit down hard on my bottom lip.”  
 “Steve’s the strongest bastard I know. And you’re no weakling either,” he said poking me on the arm. “We’ll know more soon.”  
 He put his arm around me and I laid my head on his against his shoulder. I let the tears fall for the first time since getting the news. Tears of fear. Fear of the blue man. Everything was about to change.  
 “Anybody need a washroom break?” asked the Corporal.  
 “No,” said JR.  
 “Let’s just get there.” I said, clenching my purse against my stomach.  
 “You got it.”  
[linespace]  
Steve was home barely a month when the fatigue rolled in and grounded me like a miasma. I didn’t cry this time, the way I did after we lost our first baby. But, there was a dullness that would not dissipate, the way you can’t taste your food when you’re sick. It shrouded itself around me every afternoon and all I wanted to do was sleep. I resisted, but at night, though I’d plummet to sleep easily, I’d wake up after an hour to spend the rest of the night staring at our speckled ceiling, listening to Steve snore on his back. Eventually, exhaustion cold clocked me. I could no longer move from my bed in the morning — peeing the bed seemed like a viable option. Steve left long before I did every day, so, I did my best to hide it from him but, I knew I couldn’t keep the charade going much longer. Finally, I succumbed.

“You need to find me a supply,” I said to the school secretary.  
 “When do you need it for?”  
 “Now. I need it right now! I haven’t slept for weeks!”  
 She looked at me dumbstruck. I didn’t stay to explain. I walked out and went straight to bed.  
 Three days was as much as Steve could take.  
 “When are you going to get yourself sorted out? You can’t stay down all day.”  
 “After looking after everything for nine months, I’m sure you can give me until the end of the week,” I said. “Aren’t you some kind of super-soldier after all?”  
 “Just call your doctor,” he said as he picked up the diaper bag I had packed.  
 The doctor was adamant.  
 “Danielle, you’re depressed.”  
 “I can’t be, I’m not even crying. I’m just exhausted.”  
 “You don’t need to cry to be depressed. I want you to take some time off.”  
 “I can’t. I have the grade six testing and these kids are already behind.”  
 “Never mind the damn test, Danielle. The kids will survive.  
 I tried to get better: massage therapy, reflexology, Reiki, meditation, talk therapy and medication too — again. Talk therapy was a bust: slim pickings in Pembroke. Reflexology didn’t seem to work. I couldn’t concentrate long enough to meditate, and massage was only as good as it lasted. The Reiki lady did tell me that my heart chakra was blocked: “You’re heart is broken. You have so much pain in your body for such a young woman,” she said.  
 The meds eventually lifted me out of the fog, but it took longer this time. I returned to teach a month later to a disenchanted principal and more pressure than ever to get the students ready for their provincial tests.  
[linespace]  
For two years, we tried to get a posting to Trenton that would give our family stability. Tours overseas would no longer be required. Rather, Steve’s only responsibilities would be to teach new sets of recruits at the parachute school coming in from bases all over Canada. It was the closest thing to a regular job we could achieve, while still keeping Steve challenged and fulfilled in the army. The Trenton Base is known for its jump school where the opportunities for growth were considerable. I just wanted to move there so we could be together. Missing most of Owen’s first year had saddened Steve as much as me.  
 “It’s all happening too fast. I don’t want to miss another day with Owen,” Steve said when he got home from work. “I need to get that posting to Trenton,” he said while smooching our son.  
 “I know, nothing like a baby in the house to show you just how fast our lives are zooming by,” I said, taking Owen and bouncing him on my lap, his chubby legs wobbling. “That would be incredible Steve,” I said half-believing it.  
 “I’m going to see who I can talk too, to make this happen,” he said. I squeezed Owen in my arms and kissed the top of his head.  
 Three lingering weeks later, the decision came through. They had invested too much in him at base Petawawa, and they were not going to let their Golden Boy get away. Someone at the top stopped the transfer. Again and again we tried.  
 “We’re never getting out of here,” I snapped after Steve came home with the latest rejection — the posting had gone to someone else.  
 “Maybe next year,” he said tossing his beret on the table.  
 “Ya right. As if. They own us, Steve.” I said plunking Owen in his playpen.  
 “Dan, I may have a plan that could keep me close to home for a while,” he said.  
 “What is it?” I asked, sitting down beside him at the kitchen table, my knees tucked under my chin.  
 “There’s a position called the *UEO* that could keep me home and out of the field. It’s a desk job.”  
 “You would do that? I mean, are you sure?”  
 “I’m sure. At least for a while,” he said getting up to grab Owen from his playpen and sitting him on his lap, all three of us at the table together.  
 He started his new job a couple of weeks later. Most of his friends were stunned that Steve Daniel was working a desk, but he needed the break. He was now the Aircell Seargent, responsible for coordinating parachute operations between Petawawa and Trenton. He enjoyed many facets of this job and worked closely with the pilots. He was also home every night to tuck Owen into bed and read him bedtime stories. We were fast becoming a boring-normal family.  
 The routine didn’t last long. Six weeks later, the green bags came out of the basement again. He’d been tasked to teach the *Basic Parachutist Course* in Trenton.  
 “On the road again…” I said, while scrubbing the dishes in the sink.  
 “I was wondering when you’d start.”  
 “Can you blame me?”  
 “Jesus Dan, this is good for us! It’s an opportunity to network. You want that posting to Trenton right?”  
 “I don’t want to be married and endlessly alone,” I said, seizing the tea-towel from over my shoulder and belting it on the counter. “Why can’t you stay with the UEO job? It was finally good for once.”  
 “I’m not discussing this. It’s a done deal.”  
 “This course will not guarantee anything besides more time apart,” I yelled as he walked away.  
 “I’m so sick of this shit,” he said rushing back towards me, pointing his finger to my chest. “Why don’t you move back to Sudbury and live with your Mom?”  
 “Don’t tempt me Steve. I’m done. This is NOT a life!”  
 “Well Dan, that’s your problem. I’m never leaving the army, so accept it or leave!”  
 “Nice! You know, marriage is supposed to be a compromise and for the last seven years, I’m the ONLY ONE whose been compromising.”  
 “Living with you is no picnic either. You’re always depressed and you never want to have sex,’ he said exposing his teeth.  
 “Screw you.”  
 “You know, life’s not that bad. You should see how the other half lives. Spend a day in Afghanistan and that will cure your depression.”  
 “You’re such a Jack Ass! I don’t know how else to tell you that I *need things to change*,” I screamed pulling on the sides of my pants, bunches of cotton in each fist.  
 “Well maybe it’s time we go our separate ways,” he said before walking out.  
 I was hoping he would hit me, so I’d have a real reason to leave. I always expected it, a punch in the face, even though he never gave me a reason. Growing up with my father had made me a flincher. He thought it was funny to get in my face with his fist in the air. I knew my fear made him feel brave.  
[linesapce]  
Two weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, I listened as his truck peeled out of the driveway. Again.   
 I kept telling myself it was love that made me stay.  
[linespace]  
Steve came home on weekends. I was encouraged to make the most of our time together. I brushed a smile on my face when he strode through the door on Fridays and continued to busy myself late into the night after he disappeared on Sundays, with laundry, schoolwork and Owen.  
 Even before the four week Parachutist Course wrapped up, Steve was *voluntold* to take acourse in Trenton — another stellar opportunity for the family. This one was called the MFPI for short (Military Freefall Parachute Instructor Course.) At least he was no longer in Afghanistan, his parents told me. I should count my blessings. I continued to keep all the balls in the air as I feverishly counted down to summer holidays. It had been a long year.  
 Steve had been gone nine weeks. The MFPI course was winding down. Two more weeks to go.  
 I withstood another end-of-the-year staff party by a lake and arrived home later than usual on a school night. I had just put Owen to bed when the phone rang.  
 “Hey babe, how was the staff party?”  
 “It was actually alright for once. I’m glad it was outside.”  
 “That’s great.”  
 “And you? Any jumps today?”  
 “I had the best day! Seriously!”  
 “Why so special?” I asked, sinking into the corner chair of the living room.  
 “I don’t know. The air. The sun. The open road. I took the longest ride of my life on my bike tonight. I just couldn’t get enough.”  
 “Well, aren’t you just living it up out there? You must be tired now.”  
 “I’m exhausted actually. Five jumps today.”  
 “What? That’s insane! How can they make you jump so many times in one day?” I remember him telling me that one jump was the equivalent of an eight-hour work-day. It was extremely taxing on the body and the adrenaline alone could wipe you out.  
 “They’re just trying to maximize the air time, cut down on the days we need the planes.”  
 “Jeez, that sounds like way too much. Get some rest over there. I’ll see you tomorrow night for the big weekend.”  
 He called two minutes later. He never called back after we said good-bye. That was my thing.  
 “I just wanted to hear your voice one more time,” he said.  
 “Well, this is a nice surprise. I’ll see you in my dreams, Sergeant.” I said, closing my eyes.  
 “I love you Dan. I’m glad you’re feeling better. We’ll find a way to make this work babe, for the both of us. I want us to be together until we’re old and wrinkled and rocking in our chairs on that wrap-around porch you always wanted.”  
 “I really hope for that too,” I said.  
[linespace]  
I was holding a large box when I heard my name over the school intercom.  
 “Mme. Fraser, line one.”  
 The kids had finished school the day before and we had one final day to file our report cards and get our classrooms in order. I was hoping it was not an irritable parent, displeased with their child’s report card. I was looking forward to seeing Steve that evening. I knew he would be busy all day with his responsibilities coordinating the jumps for the Airborne reunion that coincided with Canada Day and his jump course.  
 It takes approximately 45 seconds to walk from my class to the front office. That is how long I had before lightening hit the ground around me and the blue man showed himself, both hands in the air. I had no warnings that morning — no intuitions, no dreams the night before. Just a summer morning filled with an endless blue sky where hope and possibility gleamed.  
 “*C’est l’armée*,” the secretary whispered.  
 I took the phone and said hello.  
 “Dan, it’s Tim, Tim Partello.”  
 “What’s wrong?”  
 “Steve had an accident. He’s in the hospital in Belleville. He’s being transferred to Kingston.”  
 “What?” I said, pushing my hair off my face.  
 “He got hurt on a jump. Might have broken both legs, and hips. We’ll know more soon.”

“Oh my God,” I said, palm against my forehead, leaning against the secretary’s mammoth desk.   
 “I was on the jump zone when it happened. I won’t leave here until you get here. The doc will be calling you soon. Stay there and wait for the call.”  
 “I can’t believe this,” I said.  
 “It’s going to be OK. Steve’s a beast.”  
 I sat in a room by the office for almost an hour. I could not speak to anyone. I paced. I sat. I stood. I thought of his motorcycle and how much he loved riding. I thought of how heartbroken he would be to lose a summer of riding after waiting so long to put his bike on the road. I waited alone. I was a pro.  
 “*Danielle, le téléphone, c’est pour toi*,” the secretary said as she handed me the phone.  
 “Is this Mrs. Daniel?”  
 “Yes,” I said, standing with my hand against my chest.  
 “My name is Dr. Lee, I’m the emergency physician here at Belleville General. Your husband had a parachuting accident this afternoon.”  
 “Yes, I know,” I said.  
 “I’m sorry to tell you this, but your husband is paralyzed.”  
 “What? I was told his legs were broken.”  
 “No miss. We were hoping they were, but his back is broken. He’s paralyzed. Waist-down.”  
 “Miss?”  
 “Yes.”  
 “I’m afraid this is permanent. He will not walk again. I’m sorry.”  
 I handed the phone back to the secretary. Night crashed down on me but my eyes couldn’t adjust to the darkness. I wanted to collapse, I wanted to scream, I wanted to run, but I could not do any of these things. I couldn’t even move. Not one step. The secretary, who was also a military wife, was speaking to the doctor in her broken English.  
 “I am *la secrétaire* at Danielle’s work,” she said, her blue eyes full of tears. She cried but I couldn’t. She looked at me as she listened to the doctor. He told her the same thing. Day had turned into night and it was never going to change back.  
[linespace]  
I don’t remember how I got home, how I packed a bag of belongings or how I ended up in the mid-sized car with the Corporal in the front and JR in the back. I don’t remember speaking to my sitter and telling her I had to leave for Kingston and that my mom or my in-laws would be driving four hours from Sudbury to pick up Owen. But I do remember another call I received at the school after the doctor hung up.  
 It was the military. Steve’s *RSM*, his Regimental Sergeant Major. His big boss.  
 “Mrs. Daniel, this is RSM Franklin. I’m really sorry to hear about Steve.”  
 “Me too.”  
 “I just wanted to let you know that it wasn’t an equipment malfunction that caused the accident.”  
 “What is that supposed to mean? Are you seriously telling me it was Steve’s fault? I just found out my husband is PARALYZED and you call to tell me the army is not responsible?”  
 “I’m sorry. I’m not used to making these calls. It’s just, I thought you should know.”  
[linespace]  
The drive from Petawawa to Kingston is 3 hours and 39 minutes. That is how long I have to rebuild my crumbling wall, and make it tall and strong. A fortress.  
 I walk into the emergency department with a sure and quick step, while JR and the Corporal take their places in the waiting room.  
 “I’m looking for Steve Daniel, please,” I say.  
 The nurse points to the first room across the hall. As I walk towards the room, I feel all eyes on me. The staff has stopped to watch. I push the heavy golden curtain aside and see his half-naked body lying under a bright light. Tim waves at me as he walks out, still talking on his cell phone, speaking military.  
 “Steve, I’m here,” I say. His 6-foot-3 body fills the entire stretcher, his dark muscular frame in contrast to the white sheet that covers his lower half. He is lying perfectly still and looking up at the ceiling. I hurry over to him and hold his hand.  
 “I’m here babe, I’m sorry it took so long,” I say.  
 “Dan, I’m paralyzed,” he whispers as a tear rolls down the side of his cheek, his eyes, still facing the ceiling. “It’s permanent,” he says.  
 “I know baby, I know. The doctor in Belleville called me. We are going to get through this,” I say and kiss his forehead.  
 Suddenly the doctor walks in chewing on an apple.  
 “You must be Mrs. Daniel?”  
 “Yes.”  
 “I’m the surgical resident. Are you aware that your husband is paraplegic?”  
 “Yes,” I say.  
 “Good.”  
 “We need to wait a few days for the swelling to go down before we can go in. Your husband shattered a vertebra in his back due to the fall. He’s T-11 complete, which means there is no hope he’ll walk again. That might sound harsh but there’s no sense in giving people false hope. We will be fusing bone from his hip to his spine and then inserting metal rods to help keep his back straight. Any questions? Mrs. Daniel, do you have any questions?” he asks, as he continues to chomp on his apple.  
 “None at this time,” I say, and watch him exit the room.  
 “Good God, are all doctors pricks?”  
 “He’s right Dan. I’d rather know right away.”  
 I grasp his hand.  
 “Where’s Owen?” he asks.  
 “I called my mom and your parents, and they’re all heading to Pembroke tonight. I should call the sitter to check on him. I’ll be right back OK?”  
 “I’m glad you’re here,” he says as he squeezes my hand, tears rolling down his face.  
 “I’m not going anywhere, I promise,” I say, then kiss his lips and wipe his wet cheeks with the back of my hand.  
 As I push the curtain aside, I feel all eyes on me once more. Somehow I get out of their sight, around the first corner and lean into the wall, sinking to the cold concrete floor. I watch an older man, holding his gown closed, dragging his slippered-feet against the floor as he stares forward. I let my head fall into my hands and sob.  
 As I bawl, I curse the Gods, the army, the heartless doctors, the blue man — I curse them all.

NCO  
 *The non-commissioned officer is often referred to “the backbone” of the armed forces.*  
I am the pillow-tucker, the ice-chip-runner and the oh-your-urine-bag-is-full-checker. I am devastated.  
 Steve has been paralyzed for seven days and seven nights. I’m counting the minutes between his doses of medication. His spine is still severed. He’s suffering with chills, nausea and vomiting, despite the morphine pump, the praying and the Reiki being sent by my aunts and other Reiki Masters across the globe. Steve doesn’t believe in Reiki to promote healing, but he’ll try anything at this point. The Percocets are making him hallucinate, too.  
 “Dan, let Molly in.” he mumbles.  
 “I did Steve. I already did,” I say as I watch his teeth chatter, his lips splitting from the desert inside him.  
 The nurse comes in every few hours to check on him and move his body so he doesn’t develop pressure sores. “It’s your worst nightmare,” she says to me as she flips his body from his back to his right side, using the sheets to help shift him. Twice a day, they pull the blankets off of his legs, poke him with needles and ask him to move his toes as I watch in painful silence. The toes don’t move. He can’t feel them. He feels queasy from all of the medication, but without it, the pain would be intolerable. He cannot eat. My purpose is to keep him hydrated and make sure the nurses are on time with his next dose of barely-there pain relief.

Steve’s surgery is scheduled for the next day. The swelling has taken longer than expected to subside. The surgeon tells us he will be reconnecting Steve’s spine using a piece of bone from Steve’s hip, exactly as the surgical resident said.  
 “But this is only to prevent his spine from curving,” his surgeon says as he scribbles something in his chart. His words hang over me like a net. “It won’t change anything,” he adds.  
[linespace]  
A parade of khaki moves through the ICU. I know the nurses are making an exception — a uniform is a powerful thing. Dozens of troops come daily from Petawawa, Trenton and Ottawa. It was a comfort at first, to know people cared. Many of them had to see it with their own eyes: the Golden Boy who had fallen from his post. They bring home-bakes cookies, cards and well-wishes from others who are on course, overseas or unable to visit — all of them uneasy and unsure of what to say. JR comes back with Winston, Steve’s other best friend. They bring Steve a toy horse from the gift shop, the kind you ride on a stick when you’re a child. Why the hell not, they say.  
 Two of the soldiers from Steve’s jump course come to see him the afternoon before the surgery.  
 “I’m Davis and this here is Humphreys,” the taller one with shaggy brown hair says as he shakes my hand.  
 “We were with Steve, in Trenton,” he says, as if he’s apologizing to me.  
 “We still can’t believe it,” the other says. “It’s Steve, you know.”  
 “Yes,” I say.  
 “Um, we brought his motorcycle helmet, and his jacket. Just thought he’d want these, you know.”  
 He drops them into my arms, the weight bearing down, keeping me from tipping over with grief.  
 “Oh, jeez, I’m sorry, we didn’t want to upset you,” says Davis.  
 “Of course not.” I force a smile. “Do you want to see him?”  
 “Ya. OK. For a minute,” he says looking at Humphreys who is still focusing on the floor.  
[linespace]  
“Who let these guys in?” Steve asks with a glint in his eyes.  
 “Hey man, we had to come,” says Davis going in for the handshake like they play on the same basketball team.  
 “The guys say hi, they’re thinkin’ about you buddy.”  
 “Thanks.”  
 “You look like shit, pretty boy,” Davis says laughing.  
 “It’s the food in this place, it’s worse than our ration packs.”  
 “You’ll get back on your feet soon, you’re fuckin’ Superman,” says Davis.  
 “Ya, nothing can keep you down. Air-borne!” Humphreys shouts with more emphasis than I thought he had in him.  
 Steve takes in a deep breath and gazes at the foot of his bed.  
 “This is permanent boys,” he says. “My jumping days are over.”  
 The stillness is suffocating. We can hear the breathing machine through the wall in the next room attached to another patient, the sound of it pumping air into the elderly patient’s lungs.  
 “Well, we should get going,” Davis says. “We gotta get ready for tonight’s jumps.”  
 “Ya,” Humphrey says.  
 “Steve, you need your rest,” I say.  
 We never see those guys again.  
[linespace]  
 “Can I get you something,” I ask.  
 “No.”  
 “You sure?”  
 “You don’t need to stay here.”  
 “Where am I gonna go?”  
 “I mean in this marriage,” he says, his dark eyes fixed on mine. “It’s not going to be easy taking care of a cripple.”  
 “Easy is boring,” I say.  
 “I’m serious, Dan. It might be better if you left. For both of us.”  
 “Must be the drugs talking,” I say as I rearrange his blankets.  
 “This isn’t funny.”  
 “Steve, save your energy. I’m not going anywhere.”  
 We look at each other for a long while, our eyes filling with tears. I force a smile making the water spill from my eyes. He reaches for my hand and brings it to his mouth as kisses it, then holds it against his face.  
[linespace]  
Steve’s family arrives the day before his surgery. His mother, father, brother and girlfriend. Steve’s sister, a nurse living in the United States, has also reached the hospital with her boyfriend, driving all the way from North Carolina. My mom is caring for Owen in our temporary accommodations on the Kingston Base, where they sent us after two nights at the Holiday Inn.  
 I’m glad to see Steve’s family but it does not give me a sense of relief. I have never felt completely accepted by them, and the truth is, maybe I never fully accepted them either. His parent’s zealous religious beliefs create an unremitting blockade between us, a climbing wall with no end. I tried to be polite and respectful when Steve and I were first married, but it was getting more difficult to remain courteous and not sell out my own soul in the process. They are Seventh-Day-Adventists, Christians, that’s what they call themselves anyway. But they would not hesitate for one second to damn the gays, shame fat people or any Catholic, including me. I took Owen to their church while Steve was serving in Afghanistan. I forced myself to go, knowing how much it would mean to them to have their first grandchild meet their church-friends, even though the thought of it alone splattered my skin with red blotches. I sat beside my in-laws, and held Owen for over an hour, while the pastor stood on his pulpit disgracing everyone for wearing jewellery, including wedding bands.  
 “If you act married, then your behaviour speaks for you. You don’t need to wear a r-ing and or-nate your bo-dy. This does not please Je-sus,” he said.  
 I clutched my son against my chest, wanting to cover his ears from such nonsense. I twisted my wedding band around my finger and stuffed my personal beliefs down my throat, trying to prevent my body from jumping up and screaming in my loudest are-you-kidding-me voice: “We have Canadian soldiers serving and dying in Afghanistan right now, and you spend your time judging people for wearing jewellery? AM I the ONLY one with half a brain here? Am I the only one who thinks you sound like the TALIBAN?  
 I smiled. I shook hands. I paraded my son like he was Jesus himself and I made a vow to never go back there again.   
 “Thanks for being here,” I say as I reach my arms out to hug them.  
 “Thank the Lord for getting us all here safe,” my father-in-law says.  
 “Right,” I say, unable to stop the sarcasm slip from my lips.  
[linespace]

I spend the next day trying to convince somebody, anybody, from Steve’s family to sit with him in his room. They went in, but they didn’t stay long, except for his sister who helped insert the IV into his arm after the nurses poked him umpteenth times without any success. The family takes up residence in the waiting room — all six of them.  
 “It’s just so hard,” the mother says. No shit, is what I want to say. But it’s really not about you right now is it?  
 “I can really use the break. I haven’t slept for a week and it would be nice to know that *someone* is with him right now, so I don’t have to feel guilty about leaving him alone.”  
 “That’s not my son in there,” his dad says, pointing down the long corridor, his eyes bulging. “He’s on drugs!”  
 “He broke his back. He’s in agony!” I say retrieving my purse from the floor. “Of course he’s on drugs. What is wrong with you people?” I yell as I walk away, leaving them all in the sitting room with the TV blaring and magazines spread across their laps.  
[linespace]  
Other higher brasses visit with their gifts and their entourage. I cringe as a Colonel visiting from Ottawa, forces an ARMY hat onto Owen’s head. I wince as he displays a large reproduction painting of a soldier holding a C7 to Steve. One Commander calls him Daniels, even though there is no s in his name. They look over my head as they extend their hand, holding my fingers like they may shatter if they squeeze them. “Pleased to meet you Mrs. Daniels.”  
 Most of these men have worked a desk as officers their whole lives. No risk to their bodies unless you count a paper cut. I smile tightly and say my thank-yous, as they exit in formation minutes later, like toy robots. I would have rather said fuck-you as I curtsied and added a final salute, clicking my heels and watching them leave. Their visits are hollow, peppered with faux-pleasantries. We are the ants doing all the work while they collect points and move up to the next level.

[linespace]  
After seven long days of waiting for the swelling to surrender and praying for a miracle, Steve has his operation to fuse his T-11 vertebrae to his spine. I say good-bye and watch him being wheeled through a set of double doors. How many times can one heart break? I wait for almost five hours, in and out of the waiting room, skirting Steve’s family and seeking support mostly from JR and Winston. I make countless appeals to the Gods. I am ready to surrender anything.  
 “The operation went as planned,” the surgeon says when he finally pushes through the pea-green doors.   
 “OK,” I say. “What does that mean, exactly?”  
 “It means that his back should heal without issue.”  
 “So, is it possible, could it still be possible — ”  
 “It’s not — Mrs. Fraser, the only thing that could make your husband walk again is a time machine.”  
 As the surgeon strolls toward the elevators, I hurl the *People* and *Us* magazines across the room. I pace up and down the green-carpeted floor as my heart implodes.  
 “Jesus Christ!” I yell, scraping both hands through my hair. “Damn you God for doing this to him — to us! This is bullshit, do you hear me? Bullshit!”  
 Steve’s parents stand there, frozen and just watch me. I drop down on to the floor and start to cry, pressing my knees against my chest and rock myself front and back. Then, they walk away, mumbling to each other, as I continue to empty my pain into the air. My mother would have held me — she would have squeezed me until all of my tears were drained from my body. But she was taking care of Owen back at the PMQ. I sat there alone.  
 Once Steve is out of recovery and back in his room, I sit by his side, applying cold compresses to his forehead. His parents come in later. The room feels crowded.  
 “I’m just going to go down and get some coffee,” I say. I come back fifteen minutes later and they have already left for the night.  
 “Dan, my parents told me what happened in the waiting room.”  
 “What do you mean?”  
 “They said you had a breakdown and you were swearing and using God’s name in vain and — ”  
 “Are you freakin kidding me right now? You just had surgery and — ”  
 “Dan listen, I’m tired. I’m in pain. I don’t need any more stress right now,” he says almost crying.  
 “I know.”  
 “You have to apologize. You have to make it right.”  
 “Apologize? For being heartbroken? No. I will NOT apologize for that. I can’t even believe they told you. They are so twisted. How is this helping you?”  
 “Dan, this is not a request. Fix it. For me.”  
 “Fine.”  
 After I leave the hospital, I go to their hotel and knock on their door. They open it, looking at me like I had kicked a dying dog.  
 “I’m sorry if I offended you earlier today. I was just hurting so much. It’s been so hard.”  
 “We forgive you,” my father-in-law says. His wife, Steve’s mother, watches and says nothing. “But don’t you ever talk like that again,” he says pointing to my chest with his long finger.  
 I begin to weep and hug him, to my surprise. All I have ever wanted is their love. He backs away from me and pats my back awkwardly. “Just pray to Jesus, he will help you now,” he says with my mother-in-law standing by his said, eyes glued to the floor and arms behind her back, wearing her denim jumper.  
 I walk out of the room, dragging my hand along the wall as I make my way to the exit, wishing I had a big black marker to stain the walls in my wake. Each step brings me downward into the loneliest and deepest tunnel where no one can hear my cries or the sound of my shattered heart sinking into a place it’s never been before. I exhale as I push open the door, realizing I’ve been holding my breath for far too long.  
[linespace]  
Owen and my mother are staying in the emergency PMQ — the drab clapboard housing where women and their children are kept during domestic violence incidents on base in Kingston. The furniture is hard; the couch has two cushions and wooden armrests. The floor is linoleum. It reminds me of the hospital where Steve lies. There are two bedrooms. I share one with Owen and my mom is in the other. The rooms are stark with little linen and towels. We bought groceries, mostly for Owen. My mom and I still have no appetite. Outside, the garbage and recycling bins line the rows of similar PMQs’. Barbecues and satellites litter the side of buildings. The stench of garbage is unbearable in the summer’s heat. It’s a temporary place, a 48-hour kind of place without a working washer and dryer in the basement and a leaky air conditioner. It is not safe for a 2-year-old toddler, walking barefoot in the puddled water.  
 “There has to be something else available on base. I need to do Steve’s laundry and Owen’s too,” I tell my assistant officer Jameson for the umpteenth time.  
 “Sorry mam, all other single PMQs’ are promised to officers whose families are visiting for summer vacation,” he said.  
 Every phone call to the commander at the military base is rejected. The Padre is told the same story. This is it. Like it or lump it.  
 “I know we’re not from this base, but I thought we were part of the same army. Please pass this on to your superior,” I say one last time to my assisting officer.  
 The definitive answer comes back at 2 pm the following day — there is nothing more they can do for us at Base Kingston.  
[linespace]  
I call the Padre to see if he can take me to see the Colonel. I am done dealing with his subordinates.  
 “I’m brave enough to show you where the office is but not brave enough to take you in,” the Padre says as he grips the steering wheel and puts his station wagon into park.  
 “I don’t want you in any trouble, Padre, I know how the system works. All of a sudden, you get posted to Tim-Buck-Two with two weeks notice.”  
 “Anything is possible,” says the Padre.  
 “You have a family to take care of and a big one at that. Six kids is a lot of mouths to feed these days,” I say.  
 “Well you’re braver than most men I put through Basic Training.”  
 “Thank-you Padre.”  
 “I’ll wait here for you missy.”  
 I march up the stairs to the Colonel’s headquarters, wearing my brown clogs and Capri pants. If the Commander of the base is not going to answer my phone calls, then, I’ll go to him.  
 “I’m looking for Colonel Larson,” I say, hauling myself military straight. His secretary looks at me startled.  
 “I’m sorry, miss, but Colonel Larson has left for the day.”  
 “Where can I find him? Is there a number where I can reach him?”  
 “I’m unable to give you that information.”  
 “Well, this cannot wait till Monday. I’m from Petawawa and — ”  
 “You’re the one with the husband in that parachuting accident? Her voice softens.  
 “Yes.”  
 “You may be able to find him at the officer’s mess,” she says, then pursing her lips as if sucking back the words she has let out in a moment of weakness. “Hurry on then.”  
 I step through the double doors of the Officer’s Mess flanked with large flags. Black and white photos of uniformed men plaster the walls. I’m not sure what I’m going to say, but I can’t speak through one more middle-man. I push through another set of doors and hear laughter ahead. After turning the corner, four young soldiers dressed in uniform halt and watch me barrel down the hall. They look confused and amused.  
 “Can you tell me where to find Colonel Larson?”  
 “Oh ya, he’s in the mess,” one of the blonde officers says with a smirk.  
 “Through here?” I nod, my heart pounding through my summer cotton blouse.”  
 “Yep.”  
 I push through the third set of doors, and away from their two-beer buzz. The room is dimly lit despite the shining bright sun outside. The walls are panelled with dark wood and the bar displays a broad overhead of shiny glasses. Uniformed men gather at tall tables — standing with drinks in hand. Everyone seems to notice me; there are no other women in the room. Their eyes follow me like they would lose me if they looked away.  
 “Where can I find Colonel Larson?” I ask the first group of soldiers I come to. They look stunned, squeezing their beers. One of the men smiles slightly, showing his stained teeth. He points to the far table. I don’t bother thanking him. I make my way towards the Colonel. He doesn’t notice me, even though the other four men with puffy chests displaying multi-colored stripes stop and watch me approach their table. He finishes his sentence before he turns around and sees me. His eyes widen as he swallows the last of his drink and sets it on the table.  
 “Colonel Larson, my name is Danielle Fraser and my husband is Steve Daniel — the soldier who is lying paralyzed at Kingston General Hospital. Could I have a word with you please, sir?”  
 He tries to smile and exchanges a glance with the man next to him and says: “Let’s talk over here.”  
 My clogs and my Capris follow the man with grey hair and the rack of chips on his chest, the top-ranking soldier on Base Kingston. He walks several tables away from the others and clears his throat.  
 “What can I do for you?” he says, joining his hands together on the table.  
 “I know you don’t know my husband, but he is, was — *is* one of the best soldiers in this army. He won the General Vance Award just before his accident. You know: the one voted by his peers AND superiors. He gave so much to this military and — ”  
 “I know. I have heard about his reputation in the Forces — ”  
 “Well sir, it seems that once you’re down and broken, the army abandons you.”  
 “Mrs. Daniels, I can assure you that is not the case — ”  
 “I know we’re not from base Kingston, but aren’t we part of the same Armed Forces, sir?”  
 “Well, of course. It’s just — ”  
 “We’re not officers?”  
 “Of course not, they’re just isn’t any place to put you,” he replies sharply. “Those PMQs’ have been promised to other members.”  
 “You should know I’m here with my two-year old son. We have sacrificed enough for this army. All I’m asking for is a safe place for my son where I can do laundry. You are welcome to visit us to see for yourself Mr. Larson, sir.”  
 “That won’t be necessary. I can see you are very distraught over this. I will see what I can do.”  
 “Thank-you,” I say using all of my strength not to let this man see me cry.  
 “I’ll have someone call you this evening Mrs. Daniel. And we’re sorry for your husband’s accident. It’s a loss for us all.”  
[linespace]  
I have no faith in the Colonel, I return to the PMQ and help my mother pack up my son’s things. I think it’s best for him to return home, no matter the impending changes in our residence. I just want him safe and away from this base.  
 “I’m sad to see you go mom, but I just don’t want Owen here anymore. It’s causing me more anxiety.”   
 “*C’est correcte* Danielle. I understand. I’ll take good care of him.”  
 Thank God for you. I would have no one right now.”  
 “*Inquiète-toi pas*. You have nothing to worry about where Owen is concerned. But I want you to try to eat and get some sleep. You need to stay healthy.”  
 “I know Mom, I’ll try.”  
 I hug Owen in my arms, kiss the top of his head and quickly hand him over to my Mom. “OK. Just go. Please call me when you guys get in.”  
 “I love you *tounne*.”  
 “Love you too, Mom.”  
 I watch the van turn off the base and onto the main road. I wipe my tear-streaked face with both hands.  
 The call comes an hour later from Jameson. He will take me to a new barracks that evening. I am to pack up my things. He will be here in an hour.  
 I watch through the window as the navy Corolla pulls up the sidewalk. I open the door and hail my bags out towards the car. Officer Jameson hurries to help me to load my things into the trunk.  
 “I guess Colonel Larson came around,” he says.  
 “Guess so.”  
 He drives a few minutes past the concrete buildings, where troops are running in boots, cadets and reservists training for the summer.  
 “This is it,” he says gazing at the building. You’ll be staying in the RSM suite,” he says like it’s a hotel at Disneyworld.

Home sweet home.  
 “You’re in room H-16. I can take you there?”  
 “No, that’ll be fine. Thanks,” I say, taking the key from his hand.  
 I grab my bags and make my way inside the army barracks. Loud, heavy-metal music echoes through the halls. I pass by some guy with his door open, sitting on the bed shining his boots, wearing only a pair of underwear and dog tags. Another man in a towel heads back from the showers. The hallway is dark. I hurry along to find H-16 at the other end of the building. I push myself in and lock the door behind me. It is a large space with a living room, a separate bedroom and bathroom. Luckily, I can’t hear the music from where I am. I look out the window and see a man and a woman in civilian clothes riding their bikes. I shut the curtains and take off my pants and my bra and climb into another bed that isn’t mine. Without unpacking a thing, I rest my head on the pillow and fall into an exhausted sleep.  
[linespace]  
It’s Saturday. I know this because that’s what it says on the news. I called Jameson early this morning to have him pick me up to visit Steve first thing.  
 “I’m sorry Mrs. Fraser, but someone else will be there to pick you up today. I was told to take my summer leave.”  
 “Again? I mean, this is the third assisting-officer since I got here.”

“I’m really sorry.”  
 “Can he be here at 9?”  
 “Yes, I’ll let him know.”  
[linespace]  
The Corolla pulls up in front of the barracks at 9 am. Another young officer springs out of the car and introduces himself: “Good morning Mrs. Fraser, my name is Parker.”  
 “Hello.”  
 “I want you to know that I have Jameson’s phone, and the number is the same.”  
 “Would you mind if I sat in the front?”  
 “Not at all. So, we’re heading to the hospital this morning?”  
 “Yes.”  
 We don’t say another word. I am happy not to have to make small talk with yet another new assisting-officer. He pulls up to the front of the hospital and drops me off.  
 “I ah, just wanted to tell you that I know about your husband. I mean, my roommate’s older brother was in basic training with him and he said he was the real deal, like G.I. fucking Joe, pardon my French. I just wanted to tell you that.”  
 “Thank-you Parker and thank-you for the ride.”  
 “Sure. Call me when you’d like to get back to the shacks.”  
[linespace]  
I walk towards the hospital and suddenly stop in front of the doors. I see myself in the reflection of the door: I look tired, my shoulders are slumped, I look older. Alone. I want my bed, my house, my son, my husband — I want my life back. I want to spend the summer riding our bikes like civilians.  
 I want to find that time machine.

R & R

When I was fifteen, I invited my friends over for a sleepover. The Hairspray Gang. We’d tease out our hair and wear our bangs like mini Walls of China, tall and impenetrable. My mom was away, house-sitting with my two younger brothers, taking care of my cousins’ horses while I cared for my father.

I couldn’t sleep. My stomach was queasy from all the Peach Shnappes we had drunk. My friends Krystal, Tara, and Cindy were all fast asleep. They could always hold their liquor better than me.

I was restless, tossing and turning, looking at the blue glow of the clock every few minutes. My Track & Field posters looked like small doors on the wall. I pictured myself opening them and jumping into parallel worlds where I was the same but everything else was different. Around two in the morning, as I listened to the sound of the crickets in the nearby woods, I heard voices outside my bedroom window. I left it open at night because it was always so hot upstairs. I elbowed up to the sill and peered down into the well-lit street. I saw them: my father kissing another woman right in front of our house. He was drunk, on his way back from the neighbours’ party. I watched as he groped this blonde, who was wearing a white jean jacket and matching white jeans. I saw his hands on her ass. I watched as he tried to climb into the front seat of her car but she pushed him away, both hands on his chest.

“I have to go,” I heard her say. “You should go too.”

“You could have a really good time with me,” he said.

“I guess I’ll never know,” she said as she got into her car.

I ran downstairs, feet pounding each step. I whipped open the front door and watched him stagger back up the gravel driveway, weaving from side to side. Her car had disappeared. I stood there outside the front door waiting for him, like an incensed parent, both hands on hips. “How can you do this to Mom? You drunk stupid asshole!”

“What? What’s your problem?” he asked, as he wiped his mouth, trying to stand straight.

I shoved him, right palm against left shoulder. He rocked back towards me like one of those blow-up dummies that sway back towards you when they’re punched. I pushed him harder, both hands on both shoulders. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. “*Ma maudite*,” he slurred.

[linespace]

Steve suffered for my father’s sins. Charged and presumed guilty — no proof necessary.

Choosing to marry a soldier gone for months at a time is hell for the most trusting woman. I married a man with an employer who granted him a mandatory leave to Budapest where he was encouraged to get wasted, let loose and indulge. The Canadian Army consistently organized brief deployments called R&R, (Rest & Recuperation) a 96-hour mini-vacation in the kinds of places where you can order a redhead, brunette or blonde straight from your hotel room. This was part of the overseas deployment — a package deal.

And there I was, for months at a time, staring out my second-storey bedroom window imagining it all, making myself almost hurl with anxiety. It didn’t help that I married a “ten.” and you know how that song goes by Jimmy Soul: *If you want to be unhappy for the rest of your life, don’t make a beautiful woman your wife...* The same can be said for a husband. Steve stands at 6 foot 3, his torso is wide at the shoulders, narrow at the wait, a perfect V. He’s muscular, but not in an ugly-steroid way, in a I-will-leap-from-the-tallest-building-and-protect-you kind of way. He is the son of a black Bajan man and a blonde, blue-eyed Finnish woman, which gives his skin a warm brown hue. His face is remarkable with large deep brown eyes and a perfect smile that forces your heart to skip a beat. I used to joke that I would hear a *ding* every time he smiled, his teeth were so white and straight. His hair is kept short and even shorter on the sides. He always looks like a soldier, even out of uniform. He’s striking. Most women who see him at the drive-through drop their change and become visibly flustered. In Bosnia, he was voted the most handsome man in NATO, by the local interpreters.

To be fair, Steve was the kind of man other wives wanted their husbands to spend their R&R with. Steve was decent. Steve was loyal. He was one of the good ones. Still, that didn’t stop me.

“So how was the 96-hour?”  
 “Over and closer to coming home.”  
 “Well you better not come back with Herpes.”  
 “Dan, you know me better than that.”  
 “How do I rea-lly know what goes on there? You guys all cover for each other. We’re the stupid ones for trusting you.”  
 “You know what kind of person I am.”  
 “People change, Steve.”  
 “Whatever, Dan. I gotta go.”

Night after night I tortured myself with every possible ugly scenario, stories of betrayal and humiliation that leaked into the days. When he called once a week on the overseas satellite line, I could barely bring myself to smile, no matter what he said.

“So who are you hanging out with these days?”  
 “Same guys really. I go on patrol, workout and read, that’s about it.”  
 “You’re not sneaking one of the local interpreters into your tent, are you? Or how about a female soldier? I’m sure they get their pick of the litter.”   
 “Dan, just forget it. Nobody can even get close to me because I’d never let them.”  
 “Nobody’s perfect, Steve. People make mistakes.”  
 “I know it’s hard but this has got to stop.”

It didn’t matter what he said. I’d heard the stories. I’d seen the truth. He wasn’t going to pull one on me*.*

[linespace]

When we were first married, all it took was a quick walk through the mall to arouse my ugly green monster. I’d track the direction of his gaze. I didn’t want him to notice other women, let alone judge them as beautiful. I’d see an attractive woman coming our way, and I’d either stare her down with my laser scowl or turn my head to look at him and watch the aim of his eyes. If he even glanced at her I would seek my revenge with snappy comebacks until an argument developed. I knew I was being ridiculous, but I couldn’t stop.

I was a little girl sitting in the back of our family station wagon with maroon interior as my Dad drove through town, a Player’s Light King Size dangling from his mouth as he gawked at the women on the sidewalk, in the other cars, craning his neck to get a better look, not even trying to hide it, my mom and I both in the car, a matched set, the two of us with our brown Métis skin. She’d always look the other way, while I drilled him through the vinyl back seat, my eyes on fire. Inside, I was begging her to say something. She never did.

[linespace]

Four years of courtship and six years of marriage, and still my jealousy burned. Steve was losing patience.

“Keep this up Dan, and I’ll give you a reason to doubt me,” he’d say.

I’d clamp down into silence until the minutes ran out and the phone line disconnected us, our fifteen minutes up for the week. I’d sit there holding the phone in my lap, angry with myself for not being able to trust the man I loved. I knew he was telling the truth. He wasn’t anything like my father. I had married a different kind of man.

Tour after tour. Four in all. Add to that, all the training exercises away from home, like the one that took him to Jamaica for ‘Jungle Warfare’, during my Spring Break. Trips to England for the Cambrian Patrol. Daytona Beach, during the American Spring Break. Each one stoking my fear of betrayal. Both of us exhausted by the accusations, his reassurances growing thin.

“Does the army purposely pick these dates and these places to break up families? Leaving on Valentine’s Day?”  
 “It just works out that way.”  
 “Right, some bitter and divorced RSM wanting everyone around him to be just as miserable as he is.”  
 “Dan, the world doesn’t revolve around you.”  
 “That’s for sure. And the military doesn’t give a crap about keeping families together. I think they want you all to be single so you’ll agree to go anywhere, any time. No dependents, no problems.”

I was a junky feeding my jealous habit, self-sabotaging my marriage to a faithful man. No matter what he did or didn’t do, nothing could change the ghostly scene I saw outside my bedroom window.

[linespace]

At first, I was grateful for the attention he was getting in the hospital. I was relieved he was in good hands and was receiving one-on-one care. After three weeks in the Kingston ICU, he was moved to Ottawa for rehab and a new routine was set. I was staying in a hotel off Bank Street, where many military uniforms also stayed, a suites hotel with a kitchenette. I drove to the rehabilitation centre almost every day for three months. Even so, I knew the difference between relative comfort and another night in hell would often depend on a single night nurse, most of them female.

This was our new life. Steve shared a room with three other men, paras and quads. Each of their lives, changed in an instant: Shawn, a twenty-something who hit a deer with his truck — quadriplegic. Dwayne, a young teacher, husband and father to a six-month-old girl, snapped his neck while playing soccer — quadriplegic. Another man who had suffered a stroke, was struggling to regain his mobility. Bonded not by serving together in the deserts of Afghanistan, but by learning to survive where wheelchairs are the only method of transportation. Quadriplegics who thought paras had it easy and paras who wished they were amputees, all of them wishing for one single do-over.

We were four weeks into rehab. We were both hoping for a maximum of twelve. All we wanted was for Steve to come back home so we could be a family again and start the “new normal” the medicos kept talking about. His team insisted we take it one day at a time.

“How was your night last night?” I asked as I entered Steve’s room.

“Good, my night was good. Lizette was on shift, so no worries.” That’s how it went for a while. I continued to deal with the red tape with our home renovations — our bathroom on the main floor was getting a para overhaul: an accessible toilet, sink and shower. I still had to organize getting a ramp installed and a lift mounted along our staircase so Steve could sleep in his own bed again — our bed. All the bedrooms were on the second floor of our two-storey house. I was also struggling with the guilt of not being there for Owen, who had spent most of the summer with his grandparents. Gone were the days where I knew his every word and new discovery. I was no longer his primary caretaker — hearing about it only by phone. I might as well have been away on tour, like Steve.

“Owen has started feeding Molly,” my mother-in-law declared. “You should see him trying to fill up the cup. The look on his face when he dumps the food into her bowl is so precious.”  
 “It must be,” I said, trying to keep the disappointment in my voice from seeping through.  
 “Don’t you worry about us. We’re having a fine time here with Mr. Owen Daniel. He keeps us amused all day long.”  
 I tried to push away the guilt, the deep ache of missing my only child, but it just became one more thing that sat heavy on my chest as Steve continued his rehab, learning to do everything all over again.

One afternoon, as we sat outside the hospital, shaded by the few trees, Steve turned the conversation to his nurse.

“So, I have some gossip for you,” he said.  
 “Really?” I asked, thinking it was about one of the guys in the room.  
 “Last night, Lizette told me that her dad committed suicide. She’s responsible now for making decisions about his businesses and properties.”  
 “OK,” I said through my teeth.   
 “She was crying when she told me. She said she wasn’t feeling supported by her husband and that she felt lost and alone.”  
 “Doesn’t she have friends she can talk to? You have enough to worry about, like dealing with your own shit,” I said digging my sandals into the ground.

“Jesus Dan, have a heart. Her dad just killed himself.”

“Ya, and her husband isn’t there for her. What does she want, a replacement?”

“Holy shit. Why does it always have to go there with you?”

“It doesn’t. This just feels so wrong to me.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I told you.”

[linespace]  
When I wasn’t with Steve at the hospital or alone in my hotel room, I’d wander the streets of downtown Ottawa, the city where Steve and I fell in love. We dated for four years while I was going to the University of Ottawa. He spent three summers working at the Canaught Ranges, thirty minutes from the downtown; the 3 RCR Rifle Team Competition at the Canadian Forces Small Arms shooting competition. While he trained all week on the ranges, I worked at Eaton’s at the mall, then we spent our weekends together. There was the market we zigzagged through on Sundays, shopping for fruit and vegetables with our small baskets. The bars we danced in, late into the night, then walked home to my apartment, our hands all over each other. The coffee shops we frequented, eating breakfast together on Saturdays and Sundays, ordering the special: scrambled eggs for me and sunny-side-up for him. The streets we walked hand in hand, always touching, inebriated with young love, soaking up every minute we had together until Monday arrived again. Now, I ambled among strangers, an empty shell; the memories of our younger selves haunting every street I crossed. The hole in my heart was gaping, and it didn’t help that I spent most of my time away from the hospital alone. I started talking to the homeless; it seemed like they were the only ones I could relate to. Everyone else seemed so busy, distracted and unaware of the existence of bottomless pain. Everyday, I gave money to a young man who sat in front of Starbucks.  
 “Thanks,” he said. “You’re not from around here are you?”  
 “No. But I used to live here, when I was going to school. Where you from,” I asked?  
 “Sault-Ste-Marie. I came out here to live with my sis but she kicked me out when her loser boyfriend moved in.”  
 “I’m sorry,” I said. “Do you mind if I sit?”  
 I sat on the ground beside him. People hurried past us, eyes fixed ahead.  
 “No worries. I have a plan you know, I’m going to start a program next Fall. I just need to get an address first.”  
 “There’s help out there. I mean, if you want it.”  
 “Ya, but everyone says I need an address before they can help me.”  
 A transit bus pulled up and a crowd of people tried to get out as others waited impatiently to get in. I used to take a bus when I lived on the other side of Ottawa, on Bronson. I didn’t miss that at all.  
 “I don’t mean to get personal, but why are you walking the streets?”  
 “Well, my husband is in rehab and—.”  
 “Oh, I’m sorry. I was in rehab once.”  
 “No, I mean rehabilitation. He broke his back. He’s paralyzed.”  
 “Shit, like permanently?”  
 “Yes.”  
 “That totally blows.”  
 “It does.”  
We both looked onto Rideau Street as people rushed to get from one place to another. We sat there, with only our eyes moving, together.  
[linespace]

Every day, I’d drive to the rehab centre and spend the day with Steve. It wasn’t a honeymoon, despite our son being away all summer, but we were learning to live again. Separately. Then the summer was over. It was September. The grandmothers went back to work. I should have been going back to work to but I’d quit my teaching job. Owen came to Ottawa to live with me in our hotel. Every day I’d take him with me to visit Steve. Everyone at the centre thought it was the cutest thing, watching a two-year-old push his daddy down the hall in his wheelchair. His chubby legs and diapered pants leaning forward as he pushed against the chair with all his might — dimpled hands flat against the back of the black chair. He’d puff out his cheeks, his face red with determination, as the nurses cheered him on. He adored climbing into the wheelchair and having his dad take him for rides along the hospital corridors. The wheelchair had become an extension of his father. An extra, not a loss. Steve was elated to see Owen and spend time with him every day. They’d never been together so much. They high-fived each other every chance they got. Being with Owen was the only time Steve ever truly smiled while he was in rehab.   
 For me, it was heartbreaking. Our family was never supposed to look like this.

[linespace]  
During lunch in the cafeteria, I’d sit with Steve and his roommates. Most of the other tables were filled with older patients recuperating from strokes. When we first arrived, it was summer and young faces quickly filled the rehab facility. Bike accidents and sports injuries kept the beds full. One of the regulars at our table was Peter, who became quadriplegic because of a mountain bike accident. He could move his legs but not his arms. His girlfriend was a medical student at the hospital, but they didn’t last. She said it was just too hard. He was grief-stricken. His break-up also created unease amongst the other married men.  
 Often, I help his tablemates open their bottles of juice and try not to help as they struggled to reach their mouths with their forks. Steve had the use of his upper body, which made it easier for him to eat. Sitting at that table, I knew we were still one of the lucky ones.  
 Steve had always worked out and he didn’t want that to change now but he was not allowed to use the pool, his doctor said, because there was no point.   
 “He’s T-11 complete. He’s not going to walk. There’s no medical reason for him to use the facilities,” he said pulling on the sleeves of his pressed shirt. Steve sat opposite him. I always made a point of being present when his medical team met to discuss his progress.

“What about his mental health?” I said. “Isn’t that also part of the rehab program, Doctor?”  
 “Well yes, but water isn’t a cure-all,” he said. The physiotherapist and occupational therapist frowned at the floor. The hierarchy within the medical team was clear. I was the only one speaking out in support of Steve’s desire to use the pool.   
 “Why do we even bother meeting if you never listen to our suggestions?   
 Steve sat quietly in his wheelchair. The army had made him stop questioning authority a long time ago. It’s a good thing I was never in the army.  
 “I see this all the time, people keep hoping for a miracle, it won’t change a thing,” said the doctor, his legs crossed and lips pursed.  
 “What is so wrong with having hope?” I asked. “You don’t have the right to take our hope away,” I said my voice trembling. “You’re a doctor, you’re NOT God.” I was yelling.  
 He scoffed, almost choking on his laugh while he rolled his eyes and signed the permission slip. I stood up and grabbed it from his petite hands.  
 “We will walk through these doors someday,” I said as I marched out following Steve.  
 “Prove me wrong,” he said.  
 The pool never seemed to be available when Steve tried to book it. Instead, he worked out in the gym, part of his regular routine before his accident. The antiquated gym equipment on the basement floor was austere — Spartan, dated from the 1970’s. It was painted an ugly puke-green and had the letters *Cyrillic* painted across its metal parts. It was made in Russia. Instead of buoying his spirits, the workouts left him feeling like a second-class broken soldier.   
 Hope was doled out in meagre doses at the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre. It felt like people went there to die.

[linespace]

Everyday, we spent time outside. I sat on a bench on the hospital grounds while Steve sat in his wheelchair.   
 “It’s another beautiful day,” I said.  
 “Yup, another summer day where I’m stuck in this place.”  
 “I know babe, we’ll get you home soon.”  
 “Not soon enough. I can’t even stand the smell of this hospital anymore. It’s not rehab, it’s more like prison.”  
 “I hate it, too.”  
 “You don’t have to come everyday. I understand if you want a break from this hell-hole.”  
 “No, if you’re here, than I’m here.”  
 “Are we ever going to feel normal again?”  
 “I hope so. That’s what the *professionals* keep saying.”  
 “Right.”

“We should go back in. It’s almost 1 and you need to get fitted for your new chair.”  
 “I’ll meet you in there,” he said as he looked up at the blue sky.

[linespace]

Once, in Kingston, after Steve was transferred from the ICU into a private room, I crawled into bed with him. Not under the blankets, but at least I was beside him. It had been almost three weeks of not feeling his body against mine, just my hand on his. His bottom half felt cold, as if half of his body had died — the way it felt when I put my hands on my grandfather’s hands when he lay in his coffin when I was twelve years old. I was stretched out by his side and we watched Dave Chapel on DVD. It hurt him to laugh as his stitches pulled. I cried in between the laughs, feeling his chilled hips beside mine.

In Ottawa, the men lived four in a room. No way I could get into his bed or even get close to him. Instead, I sat in a plastic chair by his bedside as he transferred in and out of his wheelchair. For months I only held his hand and kissed his cheek as others watched. For months I would walk into room 1151 in the morning and leave after dinner with a sense of loneliness and despair I couldn’t even share with my husband. For months as I drove away from the rehab centre and crawled into my solitary bed at the hotel with a kitchenette, while I ate for one and watched mindless TV, his nurse Lizette continued to share her grief with my husband during her night shifts.

While I was denied the right to care for Steve after the sun went down, another woman took advantage of her position. Lizette would help bathe him and care for him through the long vulnerable nights. She washed his body with warm water and soap and helped him transfer from shower-bench to wheelchair, with door closed. She would comfort him and make sure he was not alone, bringing him more pain medicine to subdue his discomfort. She listened when I couldn’t because visiting hours were over. While I lay in bed alone every night and watched Jeopardy with my heart on the edge of shattering, she invited herself into our marriage. They bonded in their mutual pain and suffering. I’m sure Steve told her things he wasn’t yet able to share with me. And I already knew that she was telling him things that were not supposed to be shared in a proper patient-nurse relationship. I pictured her sitting by his side, laughing at his stupid jokes, twirling her wavy blond hair around her fingers, touching him and staying until he fell asleep. She was comfortable in the world of paralysis, an expert, while I was still a baby bird, terrified of the sudden changes, unable to cope, my heart unable to heal.

One day, when I walked out of the elevator and into the main lobby of the rehab floor, three people looked up from the desk as I walked by. Only two made eye contact with me. One woman could not bring herself to look my way, even after I said hello and used her name, Lizette. She continued to stare at her chart. I glared at her with her strawberry-blonde-shoulder-length hair; her blue eyes and white skin. She seemed sure of herself as a nurse. I wondered what she looked like under her purple nurse uniform. I questioned if she was capable of flirting without the nurse get-up. She was pretty but not beautiful. I tried to convince myself that there was nothing special about her.

My stomach churned, catching my breath and holding it until I felt like I was drowning. Then my adrenaline kicked in and I surfaced, heart pumping as I stomped into room 1151 almost gasping.

“Steve, we need to talk.”

“About what? Is Owen OK?”

“He’s fine. Can we go somewhere to talk? It’s important.”

“I have physio in 10 minutes. Can it wait?”

“Right after, then.”

I watched him practice his transfers now without the wooden slab, a piece of soft and sanded wood he used when he first got to the rehab to help support his weight when moving from his bed to his wheelchair. I watched the way he picked up his legs from the floor to the cot, using both arms. How he threw a medicine ball back to his physiotherapist, strengthening his core. I sat there and waited, trying to be pleasant, his cheerleader on the sidelines, minus the pom-poms. I held my tongue as we said goodbye to the physiotherapist and all of the people who said hello and how are you as we made our way outside.  
 The August sun was shining. Only 10:30 in the morning and already hot. We went to our usual spot. I sat on the edge of the bench. He pulled up beside me in his chair.

“So, what’s going on?” Steve said. “Is it the army?”

“No. Still waiting to see when they can start the renos. It has to go through another ten hands before they stamp it. They’re having a hard time getting a second quote.”

“Good old army with their quotes. So what is it, then?”

“Do you remember how I said I had a bad feeling about Lizette? About how she was crossing the line by telling you all those things?”

“Seriously? This is what you want to talk about? Dan, have you noticed? I’m fucking paralyzed. I can’t screw anybody, even if I wanted to,” he said slapping his hands against his lap.

“I know. I’m sorry, but she’s in love with you. I can tell. You have to believe me,” I cried, tears of frustration streaming down my face.

“For fuck sakes. Enough! I’m not going to deal with this. I’m done putting up with your shit.”

“Steve, please. Listen to me. Do you know how hard it is to leave you every night and stay in that stupid hotel? Not only do I have to deal with the military, the house, Owen and everything else, but now I have to worry about Nurse-fucking-Betty making the moves on my husband?”  
 “STOP.”  
 “I can only handle so much! I want her mooo-ved. I don’t want her going into your room anymore or being your nurse. Giving you a bath. Washing your dick. Touching you.”

“OK. You’re delusional. She’s a good nurse. She actually cares,” he said leaning forward and pinching the skin between his eyes with his index finger and thumb.

“Sure she does. I’m sure she’s planning her next move as we speak.”

“You need to figure out a way to deal with this yourself. I’ve got enough going on, don’t you think? I’m not going to embarrass myself by asking her to be moved.”

“Then I will.”

“No you won’t! This is done. Don’t ever bring this up again,” he said, glowering as he took the brakes off his wheelchair and wheeled away, pushing the hospital door open and leaving me outside.

I didn’t say a thing. Not even when his roommates joked about Lizette having a crush on him at the lunchroom table. How she only attended to Steve at night and always lingered in their room. I continued to visit during the day and leave after dinner, when visiting hours were over. I kept telling myself that he had the harder road, that he was the one in the wheelchair and that I had no choice but to shelve this too.

I watched her reading her files, getting ready for her night shifts as I walked through the lobby and waited for the elevator. I looked at her. I glared through her clipboard. I wanted her to know that I knew. That no matter what, I knew the truth. She glanced-up and looked away again, back to her clipboard. Her face was flush.

[linespace]

Nurse Lizette added Steve as a friend on Facebook after he left rehab. Still, he denied it. A few years later, she contacted him. She had divorced her first husband, married again and was unsatisfied once more. Was Steve planning to visit Ottawa any time soon? She had married a quadriplegic, who had been a patient at the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre. Only then, did Steve clue in there was something off with this girl.  
 “Holy shit Dan, you were right. That girl is nuts,” he said after getting the last message from her online.  
 I didn’t get any satisfaction hearing his words.   
 “Are you going to delete her now?” I asked.  
 “I already did,” he said wheeling towards me. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” he said putting his hands on my hips. “But in my defense, you thought everyone wanted me back then.”   
 I knew it all along. A woman knows these things. I will always believe what I see through my window.   
 I still carry jealousy in my pocket the way some carry gum.

Operation Release

Steve didn’t want to go back to couples therapy. He’d already seen a psychologist in rehab. After a sheaf of written tests and a hailstorm of questions about sleep, anxiety, and suicide, the doctor concluded that Steve was not suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. When it came to high levels of stress, he had impeccable coping mechanisms. A poster boy, still.  
 “You two are remarkable. The way you’re dealing with this,” he said as we sat across from his mahogany desk.  
 “We don’t have a choice really,” said Steve.  
 “Sure you do. You always have a choice.”  
 “Well, there’s no point in feeling sorry for yourself,” said Steve. “That doesn’t do anybody any good.”  
 “We have a two-year-old to think about,” I added.  
 “Just keep doing what you’re doing, I guess. There’s no need to see me any more,” he said as he snapped the cap on his pen.  
 “Sounds good,” said Steve.  
 “But you know, things might get worse when you get home,” he said, pointing his capped pen at us. “It’s usually a very difficult transition. Remember what we talked about,” he said to Steve as he pushed his glasses up against his nose.  
 “I’m aware of that,” Steve said.  
 I nodded in agreement and reached for his hand. A poster couple.  
[linespace]

It was mid November. Steve had been home almost a month. He was released shortly after Thanksgiving, more than three months after his accident. His medical team gathered around him the day he left rehab in his new silver Toyota Tacoma truck – equipped with hand controls. They wanted to see their soldier-patient transfer into his new truck. His dad was to follow him to make sure he was not alone on the road: his medical team worried that the hour and a half drive might be too taxing on his body. Steve earned his new driver’s license while at the Ottawa Rehab – 10 hours of simulator training onsite at the hospital, overseen by his occupational therapist. The new driver’s license cost a whopping $500. Everything to do with accessibility cost the earth. Hand controls were affixed to the steering wheel, to replace the foot controls. A spinner knob made it easier for him to turn the wheel: he didn’t have the core strength to hold onto the steering wheel at 10 and 2 for long periods of time. A lever on his steering wheel acted as the gas and brakes. He caught on quickly. His experience driving all kinds of military jeeps and trucks made is easy for him to adapt to another way of driving. He was determined to drive himself home, even though the trip from Ottawa to Pembroke was 150 km long and the autumn weather had covered the roads with a sheet of ice. It didn’t ease any nerves knowing that the stretch of road to Pembroke was already known as “the death highway,” with the highest accident rate in the province.

[linespace]

I waited and watched the clock as I primped the sofa cushions and picked up the trail of toys left behind by Owen. The renovations were still underway and no matter how often I nagged our case manager, a civilian nurse working at the base-hospital, the contractor was still not moving forward on schedule with our wheelchair-accessible makeover. The ramp from the garage into the house had been installed just a couple of days before, but the stair-lift to the second floor would take much longer, another month according to the contractor. Instead, a hospital bed equipped with metal bars had been set up in our dining room. We’d be under the same roof, at least, but we’d have to continue to sleep apart.   
 He arrived two hours late, pulling up into the driveway with his father close behind. I hurried outside, walking Owen down the ramp as he parked the truck inside the garage.  
 “Welcome home,” I said grinning as I opened the door of his truck.   
 “Daddy’s home!” Owen yelled and reached up high, giving him a high-five.   
 “How was the drive?”  
 “Long,” Steve said. “Not used to driving anymore. I need some pain meds.”  
 “Well let’s get you inside then.”  
 “That’s a nice-looking truck,” Steve’s dad said, walking up behind us. “It looks like it handled well on the road.”  
 “Ya. It’s a smooth ride for a truck. Much smoother then the old Dodge,” Steve said.  
 “Grandpa!” Owen shrieked as he ran and hugged his legs.  
 I grabbed Steve’s chair from the back of the tailgate, assembling the wheels to the frame, with some difficulty and sat the cushion on the seat.  
 “Thanks Dan.”  
 “Owen, why don’t you show Daddy the new bathroom.”  
 Owen got behind the wheelchair and helped to push Steve up the ramp. Steve rolled in with Owen behind him and I followed along with my father-in-law. It had been almost four months since Steve was home.  
 “Wow, did you make that sign Owen?” Steve asked.  
 Owen nodded, a wide smile across his face. *Welcome home Daddy, we missed you.* “Thank-you so much,” he said wiping his eyes.  
 “Well, I should get going now,” his father said.  
 “Already? You can stay for dinner.”  
 “Nah, I’ll let you folks get settled in. Welcome home son,” he said shaking Steve’s hand.  
 “Thanks,” he said. “Thank-you for following me in.”  
 “No problem. Now Mr. Owen Daniel, you be a good boy for your mom and dad,” he said, patting Owen on the back.  
 “Thank-you,” I said, wondering if I should hug him good-bye.  
 “All right, we’ll talk to you later now,” he said, moving away from me.  
 I closed the door behind me and turned to Steve. “You’re home. You’re finally home,” I said, barely believing it myself. I bent down and hugged his neck as he touched my arms.  
[linespace]

The doctor was right. In the hospital there’d been little room for anything that might trigger the past. It was all hospital gowns and medication, cards and books — nothing to remind us of how we’d been before. But, the house was a minefield of memories that made us ache for how we used to be: family photos, Steve’s gym shoes, the dog leash, Owen’s stroller; even the cleaning supplies triggered a deep sense of sadness. I used to make fun of him, the way he would swagger around the house barefoot on Sunday mornings listening to Patsy Cline with the Fantastic in one hand, the Windex in the other.   
 “Seriously, you’re double-fisting it now?”  
 “What? You should be happy you have a husband who cleans. Most wives complain about lazy husbands.”  
 “Well ya, but you take it to the extreme. I’m considering buying you a holster for those cleaning supplies, Mr. Clean!” I laughed.  
 He ran after me, trying to spritz me with the Windex. But that was before. Steve could no longer run after me, he could no longer explore the yard with Owen or tinker on his motorcycle in the garage. He was no longer a foot-soldier, which was the only thing he had ever wanted to be. It was four months since the accident, and finally, the Daniel family began to grieve.

On the first night after he came home, I climbed into his single bed, wanting to be close to him again after so long. He spooned me, awkwardly, shifting heavily onto his side, tucking the urine bag behind his knees. I listened to the sound of his urine swish back and forth as he manoeuvred it out of sight. I took his arms and wrapped them around me.   
 “They still fit,” I said.   
 “Guess so,” he said.  
 “Are you happy to be home?”  
 “Yes. And no.”  
 “Meaning?” I asked, already knowing what he meant.  
 “It’s harder. To be here, in a way.”  
 It was harder for me, too. So many losses. Thousands of losses. Too many losses to count.  
 “Are you going to be OK?” I asked.  
 “Eventually.”   
 We listened to the cold October wind blow through the trees outside the dining room window. The trees leaned; the branches danced; the leaves fell.  
[linespace]  
During the last month of rehab, he’d been allowed to leave the hospital on weekends and stay with me at the hotel. It was to help prepare him for the realities of the outside world. A transition of sorts. But when he got to my hotel, he couldn’t get into the bathroom. The hotel clerk had assured us the room was accessible, but his chair would not fit through the door. He had to use the hotel lobby bathroom. It was our introduction to a new world where accessibility was not a right but a privilege, even though the law said otherwise.  
 In the hotel room, he said he wanted us to have sex.   
 “I really think we should try it.”  
 “Don’t you think it’s too soon? I don’t want to hurt you.”  
 “Dan, I need to try. You don’t understand.”  
 “Fine. OK. We’ll try.”  
 I watched him insert the catheter into his urethra, the urine being sucked into the tube and out into the plastic white dish. I sat on the side of the bed and waited for him to hand me the dish of urine that I flushed down the toilet.   
 “How should we do this?” I asked.  
 “You’re going to have to get on top of me.”  
 “That’s fine,” I said. I took off my pants and got on top of him straddling his body without putting any weight on him. I stroked his penis for several seconds but it stayed limp. I kept trying, working from the base to the tip. This had never been an issue with us before and I couldn’t help but feel like I was failing. Tears rose to my eyes. He put his hand over mine and showed me what worked best without saying a word and slowly, it started to harden, a little.  
 “OK. Get on top of me,” he said.  
 I held my weight while trying to make him penetrate me.  
 “Is it in?” he asked.  
 “Yes.” I answered. “Don’t you feel it?”  
 “Not really.”  
 The tears started to fall from my eyes and onto his face as I rocked forward above him.   
 “Are you OK?”  
 “This isn’t working. You can’t feel it. It’s so wrong,” I cried.  
 “I’m sorry Dan. I just needed to know,” he said as tears filled his eyes, too.  
 “It’s too soon.”  
 I got off him and we both lay there, on top of the sheets — my shirt still on, my pants off. I burrowed my head into his neck and bawled.   
 At 29 years of age, I put my sexuality away. The way some put away their jeans that don’t fit them anymore; in a box, out of sight, but still hoping one day to be able to wear them again.

[linespace]  
“I love you Steve,” I said as we lay together, now at home, in the single hospital bed in our dining room, my voice quivering.  
 “I know.”  
 I let the tears tumble while he held me in his hospital bed. I heard him sniffle and soon we were both crying and it didn’t take long for the deep-down bellow to come pouring out of both of us. The loss was everywhere and in everything. It was in the awkward way he held me in that single metal bed, in the way I bent down and kissed him, like a child. It was in all that was not said, by either of us. It was in the vacancy of his eyes, in the hole in my heart, and in the fact that he sat and I stood in a world where accessible washrooms were not accessible at all. I desperately wanted things to go back to the way they were, and that was the one thing that for sure would never ever happen.

In that moment of shared agonizing sorrow, as I wiped the snot from my face, I thought, maybe we’d be OK, because at least we were wailing together. I remembered that saying: A family that eats together stays together. Maybe the same could be true of crying.   
[linespace]

A couple of weeks after he returned home, I made an appointment with the base psychologist. Steve didn’t want to go, but I told him we needed to go as a couple.

“Do it for me,” I said. “It’s important to me.”

I was trying to be pro-active. I wasn’t going to let us become a statistic. We had to wait another month for an available appointment. We drove up the usual highway and stopped at the lights where the tanks edged the entrance to Base Petawawa. I put my hand on Steve’s lap as we drove onto base. I wanted to believe that he felt my hand on his leg. We drove past the shacks and continued on towards the very back of the base. There weren’t many cars or people around. I felt relieved not to have to see any familiar faces on our way there.   
 “Do you know where this place is?” I asked.  
 “Think so,” he said.  
 He turned left into a parking lot and the grey sky tried to swallow us. There were just a few cars beside us. I had never been that far back onto base. Neither had Steve.   
 It had snowed the night before and the parking lot was covered with a blanket of white. The ramp that led to the front door of the building was also covered in snow. After bringing Steve his chair, it took everything I had to push him up the ramp to the door. He leaned forward and tried to open it as I held us steady from behind. When we finally managed to wrench the door open, a set of stairs faced us. I got us both inside, put the brakes on the chair and went upstairs to ask how on earth we were expected to climb stairs. Finally a thin older woman with large glasses followed me downstairs with a set of keys. When she saw Steve, she said nothing but forced a small smile. We waited, as she tried every key on the ring. None of them opened the glass door to the elevator lift. She told us to wait a minute while she went to get assistance. A man in uniform came back a few moments later.

“The elevator isn’t working,” he said and walked away.

I looked at Steve as he curled in his lips. I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek and took the hat off my head shoving it in my purse. We were both completely devastated even though somehow, this was what we’d expected all along. Steve opened the door to the outside without saying a word. I pushed him back down the ramp and across the parking lot towards the truck. He hauled himself inside, I collapsed his wheelchair, manhandled it into the back and slammed the tailgate.  
 “I’ll be right back,” I told him through the window.  
 “Don’t bother,” he said.  
 “Give me five minutes,” I said.  
 He rolled his eyes, put the heat on high and closed the window. I darted back into the building and went looking for the psychologist who was supposed to see us, barging through her door.  
 “You won’t be seeing us today,” I said.  
 “What’s the matter?” she asked, her blue eyes as big as saucers.  
 “What’s the matter is this God-damned army doesn’t have any respect. That’s what’s the matter.”  
 “What happened?” she asked. The look of concern on her face seemed genuine.  
 “The elevator isn’t working. Do you know how hard it was for Steve to come to base for the FIRST time since his accident and — he can’t even get up here!”  
 “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”  
 “Everyone’s sorry but nobody cares.”  
 “What can I do?”  
 “Whose in charge here? Take me there.”  
 After several minutes, I was taken to an office with a small uniformed man sitting behind a desk. I didn’t knock.  
 “Did you not think to test the elevator BEFORE he got here?”  
 “I’m sorry. I thought somebody did.”  
 “Of course. Typical army. Somebody *else* is responsible.”  
 “We’ll get it fixed — ”   
 “Too late. I’ll never get him back here again. Thanks for nothing.”  
 “We didn’t know.”  
 “Your superior will be hearing about this,” I said as I stabbed my index finger into his desk.

I charged back down the stairs, thrust the door open, and stepped out into more falling snow. Steve sat behind the wheel, waiting. I got into the passenger seat, put my seatbelt on and we drove back home, through the same maze of buildings, away from Base Petawawa, neither one of us saying a word.   
[linespace]  
The Christmas decorations littered the grocery store. The Holly Jolly music only made me want to scream as I zipped through the aisles. I had left Steve at home with Owen to run some errands. It had been a particularly difficult day. Steve had already had two leaks with his catheter and it wasn’t even noon. I was a little relieved to be out of the house, despite hating grocery shopping. I had become quite good at zipping in and out and keeping my head down. I avoided making eye contact with anyone after far too many friends went out of their way skipping the aisles all together after spotting me. Did they think paralysis was contagious?  
 As I turned from the soup section to the salad dressings and soya sauce, I ran into a teacher from the school where I once taught. In that moment, I was half-tempted to turn around myself and bolt.  
 “Danielle,” she said as she waved. “I’m so happy to see you. My goodness, you poor girl, I’ve been thinking about you so much. How are you?”  
 “I’m OK.”  
 “You don’t have to pretend with me, sweetie.”  
 “Well, it’s been hard, but we’re getting there.”  
 “We’ve all been thinking about you at school. We couldn’t believe it when we heard the news.”  
 “Yes, I know.”  
 She moved in close and looked around before she whispered: “Don’t you think it would have been easier if he would have died? You know, that way you could have a fresh start?”  
 “What?”  
 “I mean, sure it would have been hard at first, but after, at least you’d be able to marry again, you know, sweetie?”  
 “I have to go,” I said, moving my cart towards her, barely supressing the urge to ram her, full-on.  
 “Alright dear. I’m glad we ran into each other like this. Please know we’re all praying for you at the church.”  
 I didn’t bother with the rest of the grocery list. I went straight to the self- checkout, my head down, lifting it only to look for the fastest way to the door.  
[linespace]  
As I drove home, I started to think of all the people who had not called or visited or even checked in to see how we were. I made a mental list of my co-workers from the three schools where I had taught. None had even bothered to send a card. Then I moved on to our extended family and friends, outside of Petawawa. The list was long. I started to tailgate the guy in front of me and whacked the steering wheel with both palms as I skidded through the stop sign. My closest friend, Trish, who had been posted to Trenton, had disappointed me the most. She should have been here. She could have been here.  
 My cell phone rang. I was worried it was Steve who needed help.  
 “Hello”  
 “Dan, where are you?”  
 “I’m on my way back from grocery shopping. Everything OK?”  
 “Yes, but General Hillier is coming to the house.”  
 “What do you mean General Hillier is coming to the house?”  
 “He’s coming over.”  
 “Right now?”  
 “Yes. They wanted me to go in to 3RCR today because he wanted to see me, but I told them I was really not up to leaving today, so he’s coming here — right now.”  
 “Oh my God! The house is a mess and Owen — ”  
 “He’s good. He just woke up from his nap.”  
 “Change his diaper and — ”  
 “Don’t worry about it. Just get back as soon as you can.”  
 I shut my phone and stepped on the accelerator, forgetting what had just happened at the store. I peeled into the gravel driveway. I lugged the bags into the house and shoved the food in the cupboards, wiped the kitchen countertops and table, sprayed some Febreeze, tidied up the toys and put our dog Molly in the back yard. There was no time to vacuum. Steve was still in the washroom when I saw the black cars surrounding our house. Several more had parked across Doran Rd, all but blocking vehicles from coming or going down our part of the street.

A phalanx of eight men, all dressed in uniform, their chests awash in coloured ribbons, walked up to our front door. I opened it to a tall wall of green. “Hello, come in,” I said holding Owen on my hip while Steve rolled in behind me to welcome our guests.

“Hello Mrs. Daniel,” they each said as they pushed past me and moved towards Steve shaking his hand. They stepped onto our carpet with their wet boots; none of them offering to take them off, except for General Hillier himself.

“My mother would not approve, and I’m still her son,” he said.

General Hillier was the CDS, the Chief of Defense Staff — the top soldier in the Canadian Armed Forces. He had visited Steve once in Kingston and a few times at the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre. He remembered my name and Owen’s too. He had hugged me when he saw me — the way a father would hug a daughter. I liked him. I could tell he was real by the way he looked into my eyes when he spoke to me and squeezed my hand when he asked, “How are you holding up?” He made me feel like the whole family served the nation. He had told me so. “It’s not just that man lying in that bed who has sacrificed for this country. I know how much families give up, too.” If only they could have all been like him. I was happy he was here. I knew how much his visits mattered to Steve. They had talked about Afghanistan and books and future plans. The General had even offered him a position in Ottawa, if Steve thought it was something that would interest him. He wasn’t sure, but he was grateful. Everyone else at base Petawawa had started to forget about him. There was some talk in the beginning about Steve working in some capacity in his unit, 3RCR, but there was never any follow-through. He was on medical category; which meant still in the army but not back at work.   
 “Sir,” Steve said as he sat in his chair and the men in green made their way through our home.  
 “Hello Sergeant. I hope you don’t mind that we barge in like this, but I told you I would check in on you and here I am.”  
 “No sir. It’s fine. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to meet you at the base—”   
 “I understand Steve,” he said in his East Coast accent. “This gives us a chance to see your home and your family.”  
 “How are you, Danielle,” he said rubbing Owen’s belly while I still held him against me so he wouldn’t act like a regular two-year old.  
 “We’re happy to be together again.”  
 “It looks that way. You have a beautiful home,” he said as he walked through to the dining room.  
 “Oh, that bed is here for now,” I said. “We’re just waiting for the lift to be installed.”  
 “I see. Well, shouldn’t that have been done by now, before Steve arrived?”  
 “Well, yes. I — ”   
 “I’ll see to it that it gets done.”  
 “Thank-you so much sir.”  
 “Your son must be happy to have his father home?”  
 “Yes, he is. It’s so good to be out of that hospital,” I said.  
 “I’m sure.”

“Well, we won’t be staying long. I just wanted to check in on you. I heard about what happened with the elevator. It has been resolved.”  
 “Oh! Thank-you. Sir,” I said, surprised.  
 “I’m happy you’re back home with your family, Steve. You take care now and let me know if you have any concerns,” he said, shaking his hand firmly.  
 “Thank you for coming, Sir,” he said, almost happy.  
 They left as swiftly as they arrived. General Hillier patted Owen’s back and the procession of black cars disappeared as if they had never been there.  
 “Well that doesn’t happen every day,” I said.  
 “Nope. Sure doesn’t.”  
 “It just goes to show you weren’t a regular soldier.”  
 Steve was still looking out the window, into the woods, across the road.  
 “Steve, you OK?”  
 “Great, never better.” he said.   
 “Steve, talk to me.”  
 “Not now,” he said as he rolled away, back into the bathroom.   
[linespace]  
A few weeks after the first elevator debacle, we received a phone call from the psychologist who asked us to come back to the building. The elevator had been serviced and had worked for a while but since they last tested it, it was down again. We were asked if we wouldn’t mind using the freight elevator instead? It would be the only way to see the doctor before Christmas. Steve agreed, after much resistance. I knew he was doing it for me.  
 We parked at the back of the building where Dr. Dunlop was waiting for us. I took Steve’s chair out of the back of the truck and attached the wheels to the frame. He then transferred into his chair by lifting his body with his arms putting one arm on the chair and one on the seat of his truck. I always held my breath when I watched him do this because the truck was so high compared to his chair. He shifted until he was comfortable and I then pushed him up the ramp towards the entrance.  
 “I’m so sorry about this,” the doctor said. She was waiting for us, and held open the door as soon as we got to the top of the ramp. “You shouldn’t have to use this elevator, but I really wanted to see you both before Christmas.”  
 “It’s not your fault,” I said.  
 We piled into the dark freight elevator, large enough for a jeep, where a man in uniform put a key into the keyhole and we inched our way up to the second floor. No one said a word.  
 “Corporal Lahey, I will let you know when we need to get back down,” Dr. Dunlop said.  
 He grunted.  
 “Right through those doors,” she pointed.  
 Steve and I went through to her office — stacks of paper everywhere.   
 “Sorry for the mess,” she said. “I’m still getting used to all of this. I’ve never worked on a base before.”  
 Great. This should be interesting, I thought. A civi doctor. I looked at Steve. I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was even less thrilled than I was.  
 “Take a rock,” she said, pointing to her desk, to a bowl, overflowing with rocks of every shape and size, round as eggs, jagged as if they’d been freshly blasted from a block granite, pink, black, white with thin wavy lines as red as blood. “Both of you, take a rock, you can keep it you know,” she said smiling, pleased with her generosity.  
 Steve raised his eyebrows and couldn’t hide his dismay. I was hoping things would get better and fast, for both our sakes.

“First of all, I just want to apologize for that fiasco that took place last time you were here. I felt horrible about it but I’m delighted you have agreed to see me again.”  
 “Good old army,” Steve said.  
 “Yes, I’m starting to see just how broken the system is. Horrifying, actually. I was hired just a couple of months ago and I just can’t believe how fractured the counselling services are on this base. And there is so much need.”  
 “I’m sure,” I said.  
 “Between you and me, I can’t believe we still have a Canadian military to speak of. It’s a miracle really,” she said as the skin under her chin quivered.  
 Steve and I looked at her, both hoping for a 180 reversal — STAT.  
 “Well, enough about that.”  
 “How have you been Steven, since returning home?”  
 “OK.”  
 “I’m sure it hasn’t been easy, with everything — and your son. Who is taking care of him right now?”  
 “He’s at daycare.”  
 “Good. It’s good to keep him in a routine.”  
 “Yes.” I said.  
 “You two are so beautiful.”  
 “Excuse me?”  
 “You’re both so beautiful, those eyes and lips — you both have the perfect shaped almond eyes. It’s statistically proven that features like yours are the most appealing to the opposite sex.”  
 “I’m sorry, but what does this have to do with counselling exactly?” I asked.  
 “Well, I mean to say the two of you could become public speakers. You know, motivational speakers.”  
 “What?”   
 “I know you may not see that now. But beautiful people can sell tickets, you know — all you have to do is get through this and you could have quite a following,” she said as she clapped her hands like a seal.  
 Steve and I looked at each other, bewildered. He sighed while I took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.  
 “I’m sorry. I’m getting ahead of myself. I just mean eventually,” she said interlocking her hands on her desk. “I’m trying to break into the life-coach business myself,” she said. “It’s a lucrative industry. I just need to lose weight before I launch it,” she said grabbing her belly fat with both hands.   
 “Well, let’s stick to the present. We have enough to cope with before any of us gets on stage.” I laughed awkwardly.

“Of course, I’m sorry.”  
 “Good.”  
 “First of all you should be so proud of yourselves for getting this far. I mean, with what I’ve seen with this army. You should be proud like peacocks, I say.”  
 “Yes, well, we have each other to lean on,” I said.  
 “And let’s keep it that way. Most couples don’t stay together when something like this happens. Those are the facts.”  
 I sighed. “Well, we have been through more together then the average thirty-year-old couple. The army life is not an easy one.”  
 “You’re right. I can’t believe how ignorant I was about it, until now that is,” she laughed, her whole body shaking like jello.  
 “The truth about army life is not common knowledge,” I said.  
 “The social workers here are in the dark ages and they don’t like somebody from the outside telling them so, that’s for sure,” she said.  
 “Oh,” I said looking at Steve and rolling my eyes.  
 “Did you choose a rock?” she asked Steve.  
 “I’m sorry?”   
 “A rock. Which one did you choose?”  
 “I didn’t. I don’t want a rock,” he said.  
 “You’d be surprised at how much these little things help during the day. I keep one in my pocket and rub it when I’m having a difficult moment.”  
 “That’s nice,” Steve said.  
 “Yes,” she said as she leaned in. Both of us pulled back, pressing into our seats. “I’ve been carrying the same stone in my pocket since my father died fifteen years ago. He molested me when I was a child you know,” she murmured.  
 “Ah…I’m sorry,” I said, struggling to look concerned, while inside I was shouting, *Is-there-anybody–sane-out-there-who-can-help-us? Please?*  
[linespace]  
The ride home was another quiet one. I sat in the passenger seat while Steve steered the truck back to Pembroke. The roads were clear and the sky was crystal blue. We were heading home without a plan and totally on our own — despite the healing stones we carried in our pockets.

Steve’s was black and smooth. Mine was jagged and white with fine blood-red stripes. He tossed his stone out the window before we made it home, while my stone stabbed through my pocket, piercing into my skin.

Civies

Moving to suburbia was like moving to the desert after living by the sea. Foreign. I was not prepared for this new world of carefully carved-up parcels of land, on each of them two cars, two kids, a two-car-garage. After living in the boonies, amongst the trees and the birds, where the only time you saw your closest neighbor was when they drove by on their to way to pick up the mail, this world seemed unreal, like a bizarre show on the comedy network. In the army, we never once lived in a neighborhood where you could smell what the neighbors were cooking. Now, we had moved into a Court ruled by unwritten rules. Fraternizing with your neighbors was a must. Lawn etiquette was a science. The car was king.   
[linespace]  
We decided to move back North, where both of us were born and raised and where our families still lived. We thought it would make things easier.   
 Steve made his decision to leave the military on his own. We didn’t have any formal family-meetings to discuss our options, nor did he speak with any military personnel about moving on. He never returned to work after his accident, except for medical appointments and physiotherapy. Four months after he completed his rehabilitation, he started the paperwork to retire from the Canadian Armed Forces. His decision was made. For twelve years, he had been a front-line soldier; an infantryman and paratrooper — anything else seemed unworthy.  
 “I want a fresh start,” he said when he sat me down to tell me. “I need to do something where I’m not Sergeant Daniel. I’ll go back to school.”  
 I was relieved at first; the thought of no longer being a puppet in the Canadian military seemed a blessing. It’s what I’d always dreamed of, the freedom to move when and where we wanted. To book a holiday and make plans without being called up at the last minute. To no longer be told where to go and for how long, regardless of the danger. To no longer have to hold my breath through the day and go to bed pleading with the gods for his safe return. A new place where military uniforms were unseen and unknown: it all seemed too good to be true.   
 The worst had already happened. I no longer had to live in fear of losing him, the way I had ever since we met. It had been thirteen months since Steve’s parachuting accident, and we were leaving military life for good. Good-bye soldier; hello, civvies. I was ecstatic.  
 We hired movers to pack up our belongings, and in less than a day they’d boxed up our lives and labeled it neatly — garage, toys, kitchen, books…  
 It had been a long nine months, waiting for our new home to be built. Exciting times, but Steve wasn’t himself. He barely had an appetite and was growing thin, his muscular frame shrinking before my eyes. His medication made him queasy and unfocused; he complained his mind was foggy. He was still in pain — if only paralysis meant free from pain. But his spine was still attached by a thread and this thread was the cause of intense agony: neuropathic blasts would detonate through his legs, causing them to vibrate wildly against the floor as they slipped off the foot support. He’d straighten like a board, forced to lie back and watch his legs thump against the laminate. Most of his time was absorbed in taking care of himself — washing, dressing, using the washroom. The rest he spent with Owen and our German Sheppard Molly. He said little during these winter months, retreating into his Finnish roots. He used to tell me that if he’d never married, he would have lived in Nunavut by himself in a cabin in the woods, like a Farley Mowatt character. I believed him.  
 Christmas came despite our saddened hearts. Owen helped to bring some joy into the season, but nothing was the same. It was as if there had been a death in the family, and we were still in mourning. I thought about getting Steve a puppy, a lap-dog. I asked at the local gas station, where I saw an ad tacked up on the notice board, and on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, I walked in the door with a small gift bag, the furry black head of a puppy the size of a puppet sticking out.   
 “Where did he come from?” Steve asked, smiling despite himself.  
 “I found him online at a Kennel near Golden Lake. He wasn’t cheap but he’s a purebred. A Shiatsu.”  
 “What do you think, Owen, should we keep him?”  
 “Yes Daddy!” Owen screamed and threw his arms up in the air.  
 “Do you like him, Babe?” I asked.  
 “What should we name him?”   
 “How about Rocky? He looks like a fighter.” I smiled and put the little dog on his lap.  
[linespace]  
By the time the New Year began, Steve’s affection for the puppy we named Rocky was waning. The cute little dog only made things worse. I was hoping the two would bond and bring some peace and contentment into Steve’s life. Instead, it was just one more thing to deal with. Another struggle. The dog would pee and shit on the floor and Steve would chase after him in his wheelchair, lurching to grab him and throw him outside. But the dog was too fast for him. Too stubborn. Too hard to train. Even Molly resented the intrusion.   
[linespace]  
Now and then, we traveled north to Sudbury to make decisions about the new house — brick choices, kitchen choices, flooring choices. Coming back to Pembroke was always difficult. We couldn’t wait for our new beginning to start. We were both counting down to another life. We existed in between; in between endings and beginnings, before and after, old and new. Our friends must have noticed. They were visiting less often. By the time we were ready to move, we could count our friends on one hand.   
 Nobody told us that losing so much would mean losing even more.  
 The day we left our Cape-Cod house on 1.5 acres — the place where Owen took his first steps, where I measured his height in the downstairs bathroom ever year, where hundreds of deep-rooted red pines stood sentinel — I could not help but feel gutted. So many hopes and dreams were embedded in this house. So many lives unlived. I wanted to take the tree house with us: Owen and I would sit atop its red roof, day after day, when Steve was away. We’d bring snacks and books, lying on our backs and watching the branches sway. We’d listen to the wind with our eyes closed and count the insects as they buzzed by. I’d sing him songs from my childhood in my French mother tongue and then made-up songs as we passed the time, waiting, always waiting. Steve had bought the play structure from an army buddy who was moving — they took it apart so quickly they had to anchor it with loads of nails and screws to put it back together.  
 “This thing is not going anywhere,” Steve said grinning from ear to ear while JR burst out laughing.  
 “You better make sure there isn’t a single nail sticking out of that thing,” I said.  
 “Yes Modder,” said JR.  
 “We better double-check them all,” Steve said.  
 “It’ll just toughen Junior up. Boys are meant to get stitches.”  
 “Just make sure JR!” I yelled.  
 We had to leave the tree house there, anchored to the ground, like so many other things — full of story, left behind. As we drove away from our old house for the last time, I already missed the trees. I held my hand against my chest as I tried to count them all. They stood in all their magnificence, waving goodbye in the wind.  
[linespace]  
We built a wheelchair-accessible house in a new subdivision, a French community close to where we both grew up. The hallways of our newly built bungalow were wide and the bathrooms were constructed with a wheel-in-shower. Steve was finally able to get around without scuffing the walls. Closets were two-tiered and we even had a glass elevator that sat underneath the floor in the laundry room, waiting to be called up with the press of a button, thanks to Veteran’s Affairs. The world was still wheelchair unfriendly, but at least our home had fewer obstacles.  
 Owen quickly made new friends in the cul-de-sac, where almost every backyard flashed a trampoline and a pool. I finally understood what ‘Keeping up with the Jones’ meant, where a new interlocking brick driveway raised eyebrows and was discussed around the supper table. As much as people wanted to blend in, they also wanted to stand out in these planned neighborhoods.  
 I soon warped into this new sphere. I watched out my window as the huge transport truck made yet another delivery two-doors down, wondering what the Paquettes bought this time from the Brick. Gone were the days where I worried about life-and-death, roadside bombs or marking off days on a calendar. I was now consumed with how to decorate our new home; Modern, Eclectic or Shabby-Chic? I anguished over the types of blinds I should buy. I called them window treatments. I was becoming one of them.  
[linespace]  
 “What’s with the yellow ribbon around your tree?” asked my neighbor, a miner. He often lined up his trucks, cars, four-wheelers and motorcycles in front of his house like Tonka trucks.  
 “You don’t know?”  
 “Well, I know it’s not for drinking and driving, cause those are red,” he said scratching his beard.  
 “These ribbons are to support the troops, the Canadian military, the ones in Afghanistan right now.”   
 “Oh. I never saw the yellow ones before.”  
 “Well now you have,” I answered and bolted inside. Ikicked my shoes so hard they ricocheted off the wall. I collapsed on my bed. I was already beginning to dislike this new life, just a few months in, yet I could not go back to the one I knew. I was not an army wife anymore, nor did I want to be. But I was not a civilian either. I was trapped in between worlds — one that did not exist on a map or GPS.   
 These culture gaps surfaced time and time again, no matter where I went: Pampered Chef parties, baby showers, Tim Horton’s, neighborhood barbecues, nobody concerned about what was going on outside these suburbs. “Where are you guys going for the Spring Break? You should see the boat my husband wants to buy. I think we’re going to build another house, this one just isn’t big enough.” When we lost soldiers overseas, it was never mentioned with the day-to-day weather or trouble-shooting lawn conversations. It was always left unsaid. Business as usual. Commute in. Work. Commute out. Cut the lawn. Water the lawn. Wash the car. Bring Jimmy and Julie to soccer. Walk the dog. Repeat.   
[linespace]  
Steve had a live-and-let-live attitude with the neighbours, but he grew irritated with my fuming. “How can you stomach their ignorance?” I asked.  
 “Easy, I choose to see they’re a product of their environment,” he said. “This is a mining town. It’s not personal.”   
 “Not good enough,” I said.  
 “They’re not exposed to it.”  
 “Well, I can fix that.”  
 “Dan, you should concentrate on moving on. Maybe living with our heads in the sand for a while isn’t such a bad thing,” he said.  
 “You know Ican’t live in the dark. I’m not made that way. I didn’t think you were either.”  
 “Don’t you think I know about reality? I live it everyday in this fucking chair! I’m A- WARE. I just make a choice to make the most of it. You should, too,” he said.   
 “I will never turn my back on the world outside these suburbs.”  
 “Well that’s your choice. But I’m getting sick of hearing you go on. You’re so miserable.”   
 “Sorry, I’m not a robot. Like you.”  
 “We can’t force the military down their throats. It doesn`t work that way.”  
 “Well, I can’t tiptoe around their oblivious chit-chat anymore. They have no clue what people lose so they can wash their stupid cars every day. We’re living in the freakin’ Twilight Zone!”

I grabbed my keys, and headed for the door.  
 “Why do you have to be a goddam Buddha all the time?” I shouted, then slammed the door.  
 I drove around the new subdivision, past the new moms pushing their strollers and the dads in their shorts cutting their lawns in perfectly straight lines, then I veered off the dirt road and onto the highway. I opened my window and let the cool afternoon breeze swirl through the car. I hung my arm out, letting the wind carry it up and down, up and down. I loved doing this. It felt childlike and rebellious all at once. I didn’t know what else to do with the ball of anger bearing down on my chest. Days had turned into months and still it wasn’t dissipating.   
 I couldn’t drive far enough. It was so hard to pretend all day. I wasn’t OK. I was far from OK. But no one cared to hear this. I pressed the gas down as far as it could go. Maybe if I went fast enough, the car would drift into the air, like my arm — like the birds. Instead, I continued on the ground, wheels against the gravel, watching the birds glide up and away.  
 An hour later, I made my way back. My foot no longer leaden on the accelerator as I drove the same road to bring me back to the subdivision, to the court, to the new wheelchair-accessible home, with one freshly planted tree in the front yard. A maple. I opened the door to find Steve and Owen playing with the Thomas trains. I sat on the floor and willed myself into the world of Thomas and Percy. If only I could be a train.  
[linespace]  
I was now a full-time stay-at-home Mom. Once, I was a professional, a teacher. Once, I had my own class and a purpose, outside my home, but Owen was only three and we’d lost so much time together already. I wanted to stay home with him before he started school. I had read all of the parenting books. I knew how important 0-5 was.

Even so, I missed having an outside life with friends and colleagues to talk to, a life in which I was not a mother or a wife, but a person with something else to contribute. I also missed getting a pay cheque. We had always kept our finances separate. Now I had to ask Steve to borrow his bankcard just to buy a litre of milk.   
 Steve was fortunate. He was one of those soldiers who was going to get a pension: we made the cut by just a couple of months. The timing of his accident put him under the Grandfather Clause, so he’d get a monthly cheque instead of a single lump-sum payment, like all the other wounded soldiers after us. We knew that we were lucky. That timing was everything.   
[linespace]  
At first, I dropped the words everywhere I went. Paralyzed. Paralysis. Paraplegic. Yes, that means from the waist down. Maybe I was still trying to believe it myself. This gig was permanent. My grief was so thick and garish in the beginning, like a flashing neon sign that never quit. I couldn’t carry it on my own. Every person I told became someone else to share the bottomless sorrow with. I told my new hairdresser, the tattoo artist, friends of friends when I met them. “My husband is paralyzed.” Shock and awe. They covered their mouths and lowered their eyes. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine. It must be so hard. Thank-you. I know. It is. But then sometimes, too often, it would open the door to the military. To Afghanistan. I found myself then not only broken and raw with my losses, holding them up and out like show and tell in front of the classroom. I was now hearing and dodging things like: We don’t belong there. I’m embarrassed to be part of this war. That is not the Canada I want to live in. Canadians are Peacekeepers. Why do we even have a military?   
 I do not belong here.  
 I stopped oozing my pain, sharing my words, telling my story. I changed the way I greeted new people I met. I started stowing it all inside — my body crammed like an overstuffed suitcase with all of the losses zipped-up and compartmentalized.   
[linespace]  
Day after day, I played Thomas the train with Owen and struggled to be present in his world. I brought him to swimming class and to art lessons. I wanted to make up for missing so many milestones as I waited outside Steve’s room all those months. I forced myself to meet other Moms, thinking it would be good for Owen, and me, too.  
 “So, are you from here?” a mom asked at swimming lessons one day. She was holding her baby girl on her lap, blowing on her belly and making her burst with laughter in between asking me questions.  
 “I grew up here, but I’ve been gone almost fourteen years.”  
 “Wow. What brought you back home? What does your husband do?”   
 I tried to think how to answer that question. What does he do? He gets up in the morning. He’s learning how to dress himself, drive the car again, manage pain, find a new identity. He’s learning how complicated it is to live in an inaccessible world. She caught me watching her baby girl bounce up and down on her lap, those brown curls, the little pink barrettes.   
 “Do you only have the one?”  
 The void hollowed through all the way down into my stomach and up to my throat where the words sat, refusing to move out into the air. How could I explain so much loss while she spoke baby-talk to her bouncing daughter?  
 It was still possible for us to have a baby. That’s what they’d told us at Steve’s rehab. We’d visited one of those fertility clinics with glossy flyers, and were told that I still had lots of viable eggs and Steve’s sperm was somewhat active. The doctor we spoke to had a wall of baby photos behind him, proof of his talent that glinted in the afternoon sun as he ran his tongue over his teeth, shining his toothy smile.   
 “You two are great candidates for in-vitro fertilization,” he said. “You’re both still young and in good health. What do you say, should we add plus one to your family?”  
 He took down all of our personal information and medical histories, shook our hands and sent us home with the glossy brochures filled with happy families. It was still possible. Maybe.   
 But Veteran Affairs would not cover the procedure. Our inability to conceive was a direct result of an accident Steve had while at work, but even so, they wrote when they handed down their judgment, “They had to draw the line somewhere.” Besides, they insisted, there was no guarantee.   
 It didn’t matter.   
 Whether they paid or not, I could not bear another loss. Another disappointment. I could not risk another baby not making it — not now. No matter how good the doctor said our odds were, no matter how many photos of smiling faces plastered his wall, I knew my heart could not tolerate anything going wrong.   
 “I don’t think I can do it Steve. I’m sorry,” I told him as we drove back home to Pembroke from the fertility clinic in Ottawa.   
 “It’s OK. You’re the one who has to endure all the hormones and the needles and the actual procedure — it’s your call,” he said, letting disappointment dribble through his words. But was it not having the baby or not being able to show the world that he could still have a baby that disappointed him more? I wasn’t sure.  
 “I just can’t. Not now.”   
 Sitting on the edge of the pool, staring at the little girl’s chubby legs and rounded knees, I knew I would never hold another baby of my own again. I swallowed hard and let the pain bleed deep into my bones. Deeper still.  
 *Only the one?* The woman’s eyes were still on me, waiting. She couldn’t know how exhausting it was to explain, to answer such a simple questions.   
 “We got lucky,” I said as lightly as I could manage, “the first one was perfect.”  
 After that, I brought a book and filled the half-hour of Owen’s swimming lesson with the lives of others. I didn’t give a shit about how their son was teething and how much their daughter liked kinder music and how I should think about putting Owen in hockey at an early age. Didn’t they know people were dying, getting blown-up, taking their lives? Griev-ing? Didn’t they know some people could barely tell the truth because their anguish was so thick their tongues could not cut through to form a proper sentence?  
[linespace]  
Steve was in College. He’d joined the army right out of high school and had never attended post-secondary school. His first choice was University, but the military insurance company would only pay for two years of college: infantry soldiers weren’t university material.   
 He chose business. Not that he liked business, but nothing else in the College brochure roused his interest even one iota. He was uneasy about going back to school—he had not been in a classroom since he was 18 years old. Now 31, and after four tours overseas, he was going to school with 17 and 18-year olds, most of them still living with their parents.   
 I didn’t want to hear how hard it was. I envied him, his new beginning. I had always loved school. From time to time I’d thought of going back myself, losing myself in books, surrounding myself with people and academia, for the learning, yes, but just to busy my mind again with things that weren’t my life.   
 Instead, I became a domestic. Somebody had to make supper and run errands, there was no tuition money for me and I already had my education — not one, but two degrees. Gone were the days where I marched with other feminists in the name of equality at the University of Ottawa. And there were no days like that ahead. I no longer recognized myself. I was sinking.  
 Steve was meeting new people and filling his time with something new, something that wasn’t the army. Every day, he removed another layer of his former life. Meanwhile, I staggered on with my former world stuck to me like a hundred-pound rucksack — unable to remove any of it as I did the dishes or changed the sheets.   
 I rolled around in my self-pity, trying not to hate all the husbands who walked, who took out the garbage, who strolled hand in hand with their wives after dinner with their leashed dogs in the newly built neighborhood. I tried to live like it didn’t matter. Like I was still lucky. Like I wasn’t slowly unraveling at the seams. I tried to convince myself to enjoy the moment, as I watched Owen play on the floor. I read *The Power of Now*, *The Seat to the Soul*, *The Law of Attraction.* He`s not going to be three forever, I told myself. Even so, I couldn’t stay in the present. My mind would wander into the past. To the way my life used to be. I wanted it back — the life where my husband could stand tall and hold me close. The one where he wrapped his arms around me and kissed my mouth, face to face.  
 The life where I mattered, too.   
 Tears bathed my face as I watched my beautiful boy playing with his wooden tracks. He handed me his favorite train. Even at three he was a wise little boy. I wiped the tears quickly away and forced a smile.   
 “Where is Thomas going now, Owen?  
[linespace]  
Steve rolled in from the college around 5 o’clock. I was getting supper ready, stacking the dishwasher as the potatoes roasted and the chicken baked.   
 “What’s for dinner tonight, sweetcakes?”  
 “Whatever’s in the oven.”  
 “Why so grumpy?”  
 “Oh, I don’t know, maybe I’m just getting sick of playing Susie-homemaker.”  
 “Well, I thought we had agreed this would be the best thing for Owen and for you.”  
 “Yup. We did. It’s just getting old.”  
 “Well, you’re the one who wanted to stay home with him.”  
 “Either way, I feel guilty,” I said, that ball of anger rising again, ready to ricochet. “Must be nice to be you,” I said.  
 “Oh ya, real nice,” he said.  
 I almost skidded I back-tracked so fast. “I mean, being where you are. Rebuilding. Meeting new people. Learning. Growing. Changing. Getting out of suburbia hell. Not feeling guilty about not being a stay-at-home-dad. All I do all day is wipe his bum, play with trains and talk to moms I have nothing in common with. I’m loosing my god-damned mind!”  
 “Well, make a change then,” Steve said, “cause I’m sick of coming home to a bitchy wife.”  
[linespace]  
A month later, I started making jewelry. In Pembroke, before Owen was born, I’d pass the lonely months stringing beads into necklaces that I sold to the other teachers. I’d lay the necklaces and matching earrings on the staff room tables and by 3 o’clock, they’d all be gone.   
 That’s what I would do, I decided. Make jewelry and bring in some money — my own money. I hosted a few jewelry parties and even approached local stores to sell my work: twisted copper-wired pieces filled with amethyst gemstones, jade and rose quartz, turquoise and tigers’ eye combinations and the classic Onyx and Moonstone favorite. I named them my Copper Picassos. I lost myself in these stones and beads as I collected them, sorted them and stringed them together. They kept my hands and mind busy while Steve read his chapters and wrote his essays late into the night. I thought he would have more time for me — for us — after he left the army, but school took almost all of his time now. He had a new mission and he’d excel, I had no doubt of that. He’d be top of his class. Meanwhile, even though he was home from the war, I was still missing him, still waiting, still counting the hours, still lonely. He was right beside me, not off on a desert somewhere, but it didn’t matter. The pain was the same.  
[linespace]  
I decided to put Owen in day care twice a week to prepare him for the French school he’d be going to next year. I told myself it would be good for him to have other kids to play with. But I knew it was good for me, too. I needed to find an outside purpose again. I needed to make myself a priority.  
 I began to treat my beading hobby like a business. I made invoices and business cards with the name, Creative Balance. I had notebooks filled with possible logos and taglines, purchase sheets and inventory lists. I felt like I was creating a new domain, my own little world.  
 Steve continued to challenge himself in school even though he was not crazy about the material he was learning. He was not a business guy, but he worked extremely hard and excelled in his first year of College. He soon began to grow in confidence and friendships — despite the age and maturity gap. He made the best of it, as he always did.  
 Owen enjoyed going to the daycare with kids his own age. He made a fuss when it was time to take him home. He didn’t want to leave which the teachers said was a good sign. He was adapting well. But as he screamed to stay, I couldn’t help thinking *I’m not even fun enough for my three year-old anymore.* The following week, I visited a downtown boutique with my jewelry tucked inside a clear plastic bin, the size of a shoebox.  
 “We’re not interested.”  
 “But you haven’t even seen it, I said, as I held out my Tupperware with the lid still on.”  
 “Are you planning on selling these anywhere else downtown?”  
 “No, just a few places.”  
 “Well, we’re not interested.”  
 “Are you the owner?” I asked.  
 “No, I’m the manager. Why don’t you open up your own shop?” she said.  
 “Maybe I will,” I said. “Besides, everything you sell here is made in China anyway. There’s nothing special here.”  
 I walked out into the cold and squeezed my clear box against my winter coat, with all of my necklaces and matching earrings still untouched. I tossed the box into the backseat and went to pick up Owen at the daycare before it got dark.  
 And then, I hurried home to make supper. Again.

Cluster F\*\*k

*Cluster Fuck:  A*[*chaotic*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/chaotic)[*situation*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/situation)*where everything seems to go wrong. It is often  
 caused by*[*incompetence*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/incompetence)*,*[*communication*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/communication)[*failure*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/failure)*, or a*[*complex*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/complex) *environment.*

I have become someone I don’t want to be, while Steve has become an inspiration to others, the

kind of person that ends up with their own TV movie-of-the-week. I am the shadow that walks behind him, dark and lingering.

“You need to let go of your anger. It’s going to kill you,” he said as I finished the last bite of my supper.

“So they say,” I answered, scraping the rest of the spaghetti into the garbage.

I felt his disapproving eyes on me as I walked towards the sink. Why couldn’t he just let me be?   
 I should become a professional wrestler. My name would be Mad Justice. I would stitch MJ on my chest and tie a tomato-red satin cape around my neck. It would flap behind me as I bounced into the ring. I’d wear bad-ass boots and have really big hair teased every-which-way*.*

Instead, I am an incensed domestic, stacking plates on the counter*.* He wheeled back to his study while I squeezed too much soap under the hot running water, clenching my teeth in silence as the sink foamed.  
[linespace]

It was weeks since the incident, but I couldn’t let it go. Anger was something that I’d grown comfortable with, like slipping on my favourite pair of jeans. I wasn’t sure if it was growing up with my dad that made me that way or everything else that came after.  
 We had gone as a family to the local Remembrance Day ceremony, the first one since the accident. Steve wanted to take Owen. He said it was time. I told him we would go together.   
 That morning, he rolled out of the bathroom wearing his maroon blazer uniform. My body throbbed with grief as I forced a smile, my tired eyes gazing past his. He still looked like a soldier. I busied myself by counting the medals on his chest — One. Two. Three. Four. One for every six months we were apart. His jump wings sewn above them. Wings wide open like a bird about to take flight. Golden. I watched him leaning over, putting on his boots in his wheelchair, with the brakes on. Black laces gripped in hands calloused from wheeling himself around. He laced them tightly, like he had done all those times before, even though he’d never walk in those boots again. Then he sat up tall in his chair and positioned his maroon beret on his cleanly shaved head. I had married such a handsome man.  
 Owen wore his good pants, black with a thick sweater under his winter jacket. I wore black pants as well, with my grey turtleneck and black wool coat. Funeral clothes. All three of us with poppies pinned like splotches of blood to our chests.   
 Since we would all be separated on November 11, we decided to go to the local ceremony the day before. There, at least, we could remember together. But the hardest day we would spend apart. Ontario did not recognize Remembrance Day as a statutory holiday — thanks to the Legion who had voted against it. On November 11, it would be business as usual where we lived.   
 I checked my makeup compulsively in the mirror as we drove the twenty minutes to the building. I needed to pluck my eyebrows. The natural light hid nothing.  
 As we approached the community building, a parade of cadets was already sliding into formation. Legion people strapped with medals and banners paced with equal parts purpose and arrogance. This was their day.  
 My eyes scanned the perimeter of the building, looking for the way inside.   
 “Steve, do you think there’s another way in?” I asked.  
 “There better be. I see stairs, and a lot of them,” he said as he pulled into the parking lot.  
 I felt my jaw clench, my teeth grinding front to back. For god’s sake, not today.  
 “Just relax Dan. We’ll figure it out.”  
 He’d barely brought the car to a stop when I swung open the car door and jumped out of my seat. At the back of the car, I clutched his wheelchair frame, attaching both wheels and rolling it towards the driver’s side. Slowly he transferred into the chair, the spasms in his legs shaking his body like a vibrator. When his legs stopped shaking, he picked them up with his hands and positioned his feet on the support plate at the front of his chair, strapping the feet in with a bungee cord so they wouldn’t fall off without him knowing. We’d learned this the hard way: his feet had flopped over while his arms propelled the chair forward, jamming his feet under the metal frame. Several times, he could have fallen flat on his face. And then, there were the times that he did. He pulled down on his jacket and straightened his beret, squeezing it against his head into proper placement.   
 “Let’s go,” he said as he wheeled ahead towards the cadets, Legionnaires and other spectators who had started to arrive. Owen and I followed hand in hand.  
 They looked at us like we didn’t belong — the only ones with Veteran plates in the parking lot. Empty faces looking on with no welcome or salutations as though Steve had not been prompted and persuaded to attend the ceremony by a local man who belonged to an Airborne Association.  
 “Excuse me,” I asked an older woman Legionnaire. “Where is the wheelchair access to this building?”  
 She looked around before answering me. Her eyes skimmed past Steve, then Owen, then me. Then she scanned her surroundings from side to side. A man stepped forward and spoke before she could open her mouth.  
 “I’m sorry, but I don’t think this building is wheelchair accessible, Miss. We’ll send someone in to find out.”  
 “What the hell,” I murmured under my breath.  
 Steve shot me a glare. I knew he wanted me to be careful with my language in front of Owen.  
 “Well, my son is about to get quite an education then,” I said, not caring who heard me, ignoring his warning.  
 We waited for five never-ending minutes. I spoke to Owen in French while we waited, telling him the world still had so much to learn and this was one of those teachable moments. He just shook his head and agreed with me. He knew I was angry. Steve waited patiently without saying a word.  
 “I just spoke with the custodian and I’m sorry, there is no handicap access,” he said looking directly at Steve.  
 “This is unbelievable! How can you host a god damned Remembrance Ceremony in a building without wheelchair accessibility?”  
 “I’m sorry, we didn’t know.”  
 “You didn’t know? You didn’t know injured soldiers might want to pay their respects, to the Fallen — to our friends? What about other wheelchair-bound people who want to attend? Shame on you. Shame on all of you!” I yelled.  
 “Dan, that’s enough. Let’s just go.”  
 I took a step forward.  
 “You have no idea how hard it was for my family to come here today,” I said as I jabbed my index finger into my chest. “This was the first time since my husband’s accident that we have been able to come and remember as a family and we just got kicked in the face by the very people who are supposed to know better.”  
 “We could carry him in,” the man who had invited us hollered as he approached us. Did he know about this before? Was this his intention all along?  
 “Carry him in? He’s a human being, a grown man!” I shouted.  
 “I just thought — ”  
 “You thought wrong.”  
 “Let’s go Dan. Now.” Steve said. And I knew by his tone it was time.  
 “Mama, you were not nice to that man,” Owen said in the car as we drove away.  
 “No Owen, I wasn’t. But sometimes you have to tell an asshole that he’s an asshole,” I said.   
 Steve eyeballed me, shook his head, and kept driving.   
[linespace]   
We were back home before 11 in the morning. I couldn’t wait to take off my funeral clothes. I kicked off my boots and threw my jacket on the chair.  
 “Aren’t you going to say something?” I asked Steve.  
 “What do you want me to say?”   
 “Something. Anything! Aren’t you pissed off?”   
 “Today was a really shitty day,” he said.  
 “That’s it?”  
 “Dan, I don’t want to hear you bitch about this anymore. This day was — is — hard enough. I just want to forget about it.”  
 He rolled back into the bedroom to take off his uniform, his boots and his poppy. He had long ago removed his beret. It had been sitting in his lap, an empty shell. I closed our bedroom door and led Owen to get changed, throwing his clothes into a heap beside his hamper. I knew it would bother Steve, but I left them on the floor anyway. I pulled Owen in close, his long legs dangling off the bed and I held him against my chest, rocking him back and forth like when he was a baby. He let me hold him without saying a word.  
[linespace]  
December had arrived quickly, despite my ongoing resentment with November. I was unpacking the Christmas decorations; cradling the glass ornaments I had purchased our first Christmas as husband and wife — the one when Steve was serving in Bosnia. I remembered how we spoke that Christmas day. He had called me on a satellite phone from the field, a rare occasion. He was in the mountains and eating beans from a can. He said they had decorated a small tree with various army kit to make it more festive while he was on OP. (Observation Post) His voice was still cheerful. I, meanwhile, had been having a pity-party for the last forty-eight hours. Unwilling to even decorate the tree.  
 “I don’t think I can do it again,” I said.  
 “Do what again?” He asked.  
 “Host Christmas. It’s the last thing I want to do. It ruins the entire holiday for me. I used to love Christmas.”  
 “Dan, please. I don’t have a large family like you. They’re all I have.”  
 “I know, but I keep feeling like I’m betraying myself. I can’t hold my tongue while I pass the mashed potatoes anymore.”  
 “It’s just one day. I want Owen to know his grandparents. I never had the chance to know mine.”  
[linespace]  
Two years ago we’d given Steve’s dad the proper wood to build a ramp for their home, but still there was no ramp and there never would be. His younger brother, who had bought a house with a ramp next door to his parents, had removed his. Without explanation. No one ever spoke of this in the Daniel family. And I was forbidden to.  
 Christmas was on me. I was tired of giving what I didn’t have. I could not pretend for one more day that this was acceptable. I could not open my home to this family anymore. But I did — for Steve. I kept the peace on the outside as my insides twisted with rage.   
 “Dear Heavenly Father, thank-you for this meal we are about to eat. We pray for mercy and forgiveness. We pray for those that are not here and those that are unable to eat a meal like this on Christmas day. Bless the hands that made this meal and all those who are here tonight. We give thanks for this heavenly day Father and for the birth of your son on this joyous holy day. In god we pray.” Amen.   
 I tried not to choke on my food as my father-in-law’s holy words lingered over the table like fine ash. I wanted to tell them all to eat shit — that they were all a bunch of hypocrites. I wanted them to know how much we struggled, every day, to get around in this world while they walked into their rampless houses, said grace and prayed for us to accept Jesus — *only then would Steve’s suffering end.* I wanted to tell them all to have a Merry-fucking-Christmas-and-a-Happy-fucking-New-Year as I launched the turkey out the back door and into the deep snow. But I didn’t. I smiled. I hosted. I dug into my insufficient reserves to give them a pleasant Christmas, then, as I had so many times, I picked up the crumpled paper from the gifts they had opened. I faked it while I watched my sister-in-law, who had just married into the family open her gift from my in-laws, a remote car starter (installed). And after all this, after they had gone home, I went to pour myself a glass of wine, the same wine I had asked his brother and wife to bring (after years of coming empty-handed) but it was no longer in my fridge. Even the opened bottle was gone.  
 For almost a week after the holidays, I reminded him daily that I wouldn’t be hosting his family’s Christmas again, not for the next five years. He didn’t fight me. But he did ask me to stop complaining about it. He said I better change my attitude soon because I was becoming really hard to live with.  
 I wanted him to call his mother, but he wouldn’t. He said he would tell her next year. Why call her now? It would just make things awkward, he said. What I really wanted was for him to be on my team. To demand respect for me. To tell them to build a ramp or else.   
[linespace]  
But all of that was in the past. Now was now. And right now, I needed a change of scenery. Steve and I booked a trip to Las Vegas. We had never been there before and we couldn’t wait to leave the snow behind. Owen was to stay with my mom for five nights. It would be our first holiday alone since he was born. We needed this time together.   
 We had to run some errands before driving to the Toronto airport the following day. I watched as a large man pulled into the only vacant wheelchair parking spot. I watched as he leaped out of his vehicle and sprinted to the store entrance, while we circled the lot trying to find a wheelchair-accessible spot. We were unsuccessful. The snow was wet and heavy. I pushed Steve through the thick slush.  
 “Can you believe that guy?”  
 “What now?”  
 “That guy who took the last wheelchair spot and strolled into the store. I’m going to find him.”  
 “Can’t we just get some light bulbs without causing a scene?” he said.   
 “I’m sick of people like him. He needs to be called on it.”   
 “You’re right, some people are assholes, but you can’t change them all.”   
 “That’s your opinion.”  
 We bought our light bulbs, an extension cord, and windshield wiper fluid. I was holding the bags when I saw the man climb into his truck.   
 “Just let it go,” Steve muffled under his breath, hoping for once I could hold myself back.   
 “Someone’s got to tell him,” I answered. My heart pounding. I couldn’t wait to spit my words into his face.  
 “You know you’re parked in wheelchair parking?”   
 “I –uh, just ran into the store for like-a minute,” he responded.   
 “Well, buddy, other people who really need it could use that spot. Hopefully karma doesn’t bite your big fat ass!”  
 He closed his door and started his truck. I watched him drive away and spin his tires onto the wet road. I heaved the chair back into the trunk after removing the slush from the wheels and we rode home in silence.  
[linespace]  
 “See, there are perks,” Steve said to me, as we were led first onto the plane. “Being a handicap has its benefits. We’re like V.I.P.”   
 I watched him transfer out of his wheelchair and into the airport aisle chair. I looked the flight attendant square in the face and said:   
 “Be careful with that wheelchair. Last time Air Canada broke it.”   
 Steve stared at me. I turned away unapologetically. We waited for the next hundred and fifty people to pile into the plane. I was tired already. I thought about Star Trek and how I wished we could teleport ourselves to the American desert. I looked over at Steve. He seemed calm and content.   
 “So, are you ready for Veee-gas?” Steve asked.   
 “Yes, I am. Bring it on.” I said as I closed my eyes, wishing all the people would disappear.   
[linespace]  
We were the first ones on but the last ones off. I needed to pee. I watched as the flight attendants thanked every single person leaving the plane, smiling with their brightly painted lips but not with their eyes*.* Finally, two airport attendants came in with the aisle chair. Steve transferred into it, his legs trembling after not being able to stretch or move for so long. They pushed him out of the plane as I grabbed our carry-on luggage and followed. We eventually made our way towards the baggage carousel. Some guy rushing to get somewhere almost knocked Steve over; Mad Justice gripped his shirt before he connected with the chair and sent Steve to the floor.   
 “Hey, watch where you’re going. Open your freakin’ eyes!”   
 Steve was still wheeling forward. He didn’t see what happened. He didn’t hear the repulsion in my voice.   
 “I’m so sorry. I didn’t see,” the young guy said. He seemed sincere. I continued to glare at him until he walked away. We got our luggage and went to find a cab.  
 There was a line-up. Finally it was our turn but the taxi driver seemed confused.   
 “You need a handicap taxi?” he asked.   
 “No, my chair breaks down, but can I sit in the front?” Steve said.  
 The driver nodded.   
 Steve transferred into the front seat while I hauled the luggage into the trunk. I went to get the chair as the driver reached for it. “I got this,” I told him. “Just hold the wheels.” I detached them from the frame and watched to make sure the chair didn’t get crushed as he closed the trunk.   
[linespace]Steve shouted from the shower of our hotel suite.   
 “Our roles have reversed!”  
 “What do you mean?” I asked, knowing full well what he was implying.   
 “Well, I used to be the hard ass when I was in the army.”   
 “Yup,” I answered.  
 “Remember when I would go visit you in Ottawa with my buddies? We were such hotheads.”   
 “Ya, you Petawawa boys were always full of trouble.”   
 He turned off the water. “Now you walk around wanting to throw a heavy all the time.” He got out of the shower, transferring from shower bench to wheelchair. I don’t know how he manages to move his entire weight, all day long.   
 “I guess so,” I said. He was now the kind and patient one, the one who chose to see the best in everybody. I was the one looking to throw down a body slam. If only we would have known to skip the 160th parachute jump.   
 “Ready to hit the slots?” he asked me, sliding the room key off the desk.  
[linespace]  
Vegas was a circus show for adults. Everything about it was grand.   
 “This is a perfect world,” he said beaming. “Everything here is so accessible.”   
 He felt welcomed there, like he belonged in society. It made me sad that the only place on earth that made him feel welcomed was the city with no heart or soul. We managed to get tickets to Cirque du Soleil’s *O*. The show was sold out, but they usually reserved wheelchair seats. Perks. We watched the show and it was so beautiful I wanted to weep. But I breathed in deeply instead, worried that if I started, I would not be able to stop.  
 “In my next life, I’d like to be an acrobat,” he whispered to me wide-eyed. “That’s pushing your body to the extreme.”  
 I nodded my head, remembering how much he loved to free-fall from ten thousand feet.  
[linespace]  
We rolled towards the elevator to get back to the main floor, and watched a family of twelve pile into the elevator without even glancing our way.   
 “You have got to be kidding me,” I said, the familiar rage rising within me.  
 “Just leave it! We’ll get the next one,” he said.  
 But Mad Justice could not let it go.   
 “Hey, all of you with legs,” I yelled. “Use the god-damned stairs!”   
 They looked at me, gobsmacked. Steve wheeled sharply away, widening the distance between us.  
 My cape flapped against my back and my teeth clenched inside my mouth. He wheeled back to me, and I stood behind him, like a shadow. And we waited.

The Dependent

I dragged my body out of bed after he left the room. It was just before 7 and it had been another restless night. The last few weeks had been the same: asleep by 9 and wide-awake again from 3 to 6 in the morning. My mind unable to relax; my body flipping from side to side, as I listened to him snore flat on his back. By the time the sun finally rose, all I wanted to do was sink back into the mattress. But Steve left long before Owen woke up for school. And so my tired arms would push the heap of blankets off my legs, and they’d fall heavily, one leg and then the other, off the bed onto the floor. Somehow I found the will to get up, to walk forward and get my son ready for the day, preparing his breakfast, his lunch, getting him dressed for school and out the door.  
 I recognized the pattern. I knew this long series of sleepless nights flashed a bright red flag. I remembered the doctor asking me years before, did I have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep?

“Staying asleep,” I answered.

“A telltale sign of depression,” he said.

It was happening again; the lethargy housing itself in my brain. I was too tired to fight it off before it had burrowed into my body. I couldn’t even rouse myself to tell anyone it was back. Why bother? I was already taking anti-depressants.  
 I slept through the afternoons, barely making it to lunch time before the heaviness crushed me like a huge oak tree plummeting to the ground, axed at its thickest part. I gave into its weight and made my way slowly into the bedroom, closing the blinds and crawling into bed, where breathing was almost bearable. These long naps had become my shameful secret. All I wanted was to be alone in a dark room.  
 “You haven’t been making any new stuff lately,” Steve commented after several weeks of passing my worktable, beads strewn across its surface, untouched.  
 “Just been so tired. I didn’t sleep well again last night.”

“When are you going to snap out of this? You need to move on find some purpose again,” he said.   
 “Roger that.”  
 “You just can’t sleep your life away. You eat like shit and you don’t exercise. I’m getting sick of seeing it,” he said crossing his arms, his muscles bulging.  
 “Well, we’re not all born Superman.”  
 “That’s bullshit, Dan. Do you think it’s easy for me to drag my carcass out of bed every day?”  
 “What can I say Steve? I’m just not made of steel, like you.”  
 “The longer you wait, the harder it’ll be for you to lose weight. Don’t you even give a shit about yourself anymore?”  
 Owen was four and I still hadn’t lost what I gained when I was pregnant, never mind the weight my happy pills were adding to my body. This was part of his litany of questions when he called home from Afghanistan. His comments about healthy eating and exercise were code for *it’s about time you get your fat ass in gear.* (He was the fittest guy in his unit.) I couldn’t argue; I was too weary to even respond with any kind of dignity. I didn’t have the energy to tell him that while he cemented the way for his new life, full of fresh opportunities, I was wilting from within. My world was a dark, lonely place. Any optimism I’d once felt was now barely a pale flickering flame. The last thing I imagined doing was going to some gym to shake my thing.

As the weeks passed, we slowly shifted apart: two bodies living in the same house, slipping away from each other. The way a canoe can drift from shore if not tied properly. In the past, it would have shaken me into saying to Steve, *we need to talk.* But that was in the past.  
[linespace]   
He found me in a heap of darkness. It was 2:30 and he was home early from school. I was huddled in bed. He didn’t say anything, just rolled in and rolled out. I could tell he was disgusted. He hated lazy people. He hated lazy-fat people even more.   
 I forced myself to get out of bed and rake a comb through my unwashed hair, pulling on a pair of jeans from the laundry basket, struggling to pull up the zipper. I was far from the size six he had married; closer to a size twelve now, my body swelling, distended with pain.

I wandered into the kitchen.  
 “Where are you off to in such a hurry again?” I asked.  
 “I’m meeting a friend at the gym. Why don’t you get a membership there, at the University?” he asked with his groomed hair and pressed shirt, sleeves rolled-up as he made himself lunch.  
 “I don’t like working out in front of people.”  
 “Well, you’re not going lose weight hiding and sleeping the day away either.”  
 “Just go, Steve. Go be Super-Steve and leave me alone.” What I wanted to say was: I’m not strong enough. I’m sleeping because I’m depressed and I’m sad and alone and I need you, but needing you is a weakness you won’t indulge. Instead, I left him in the kitchen, eating his sandwich.  
 I closed the bedroom door, a thousand miles between us.  
[linespace]  
Steve became even more of a superhero. The Man Who Conquered Everything. He got involved in the local wheelchair basketball team. He was becoming something of a sensation at his local College, literally a poster boy for their brochures, where he whipped through course after course with top marks. I watched as he picked up the pieces of his life like Humpty Dumpty, how he put them back together again. He was reinventing himself daily, as if his challenges were building blocks instead of barriers.

I wanted just a sliver of his strength, a thimble-full of his kryptonite, a single snippet of his DNA. Instead, my genes were encoded with sadness chromosome. Both my father and grandfather suffered from depression, though they got the highs of the bipolar roller coaster as well as the lows. Steve had no idea what it felt like. He didn’t want to know. He was the one in the wheelchair, yet he was fine. No matter what, that wheelchair meant that he would always win the prize for the hardest day, for the most improved, for getting your life back on track and fast.   
 “It’s hard enough living like this,” he said when he came home from the gym, striking the sides of his metal wheelchair, his wedding band ringing against the steel. “I don’t need a miserable wife bringing me down every day. Something needs to change.” I heard the *or else,* loud and clear. An old story.  
 I could see the repugnance in his eyes. The way he looked at my body, my stretch-marked-stomach. My imperfections. I had followed his eyes. It didn’t help that he went to College with a bunch of 18 and 19-year-olds, their asses tight, their tits perky. I no longer undressed in front of him, showering only after he was out of the house. Protecting myself from his all-knowing eyes.   
[linespace]  
The more he pressed me about getting healthier (skinnier), the more I defied him. I started eating chocolate during the day instead of having lunch. I was already skipping breakfast. I wanted anything that could be opened and brought to bed with me, eating it from a box or a bag. I hid snacks and ate them while he was taking a shower at night, too embarrassed to eat anything in front of him that wasn’t a fruit or a vegetable. I knew I was self-medicating. I wasn’t born yesterday. I stashed chocolate rosebuds and macaroons in my purse and in the car, under the seat, not in the glove box where he might find them. Little hits of comfort always at my fingertips, numbing the pain and loneliness.  
[linespace]  
We lived independently. His life. Her life. His school, his sports, his success. His spectacular metamorphosis. My dirty dishes, my unmade bed, my failure. My dull evolution into domestic drudge.   
 He wasn’t married to the same person, but neither was I. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him how devastated I still felt. How seeing elderly people holding hands was like being punched in the face. How I refused to go to weddings because it slammed me to watch people so close, nose against nose and in each other’s arms, while songs from before echoed within my grief-stricken shell. How we couldn’t make love the way we did before, him on top of me, me pinned against the bed, under him. How I tried not to cry while I faced him, struggling to hide my sorrow so he would be spared. How having an orgasm alone made me lonelier than I could ever have imagined. How I cried later in the darkness, unable to tell him that nothing was the same for me either. That even though our sex life had always been strained (because of my on-again and off-again depression and his on-again and off-again presence in my life.) I ached for it now more than anything. I wondered if animals felt this way when they were maimed: struck with shock followed by a slow and painful acceptance of the truth as they went down.  
 I could no longer grieve these losses because he had stopped grieving. Always a high achiever, he had moved on quickly. Or at least it looked like he had: he never lamented in front of me. If I brought it up, even in a round-about way, he would say looking back was too hard, looking forward was the only choice. That I should do the same.   
 I was angry at him, at God, at the whole freakin’ Universe that the first time he got hurt, he ended up p-a-r-a-p-l-e-g-i-c. That we could no longer have children. That he still expected me to love him the same. Unconditionally. Even though he was paralyzed, waist-down. Even though he was unable to love me with my broken heart, my shattered spirit, and my size-twelve body. He did not love me the same. He could not love me the same. And according to him, it was my fat ass that was bringing down the team.   
 I was sad, but I was angry, too. Angry that my healing had a time limit on it. Angry that I was forced to act like a model wife and put a smile on my face, too. Looking back was weak, a waste of time, unnecessary. Yes sir, Sergeant Daniel, Sir. Angry that he couldn’t see all my losses because he was the one sitting in the wheelchair.   
 I was the downer now, his weakest link. Not his partner in life. Not the one who had stood by him through it all; the tours, the accident, and the aftermath. I felt his disappointment in me every day. He didn’t need to say the words.   
 Our two canoes had drifted into the void. Only a speck of red could be seen with the naked eye.   
[linespace]  
It was an early summer and on this June morning it was already scorching. Young artists from Israel, of all places, were making the rounds in our neighbourhood, selling original oil paintings. Something they did every year in Canada. The woman who knocked on our door was pretty, with light brown hair and blue eyes, thin. She wore a cut-off shirt baring her mid-drift, long legs and white shorts. I watched Steve interact with her. He was overly friendly as he said a few phrases in her native language. Flirting. She blushed and pushed her bangs off her face, impressed that he had been to the Balkans. She wore thick eyeliner but didn’t need it. She was naturally beautiful. He bought some of her art; a semi-abstract man and woman, facing each other, color blue. He flashed his smile, gave her the money and closed the door.  
 “So, what do you think? Do you like it?” he asked as he held up the painting with a ridiculous grin on his face.  
 “It’s horrible.”  
 “What’s your problem? I thought you liked art?”  
 “I do, but not what she was selling.”  
 “God you’re negative.”  
 “Sorry if I don’t like watching you flirt with jail bait.”  
 “She was in her twenties. You’re just pissed because she was pretty.”  
 “Actually Steve, I’m pissed that you don’t look at me like that. Who are you anyways? Flirting right in front of me now?”  
 “Well maybe if you looked like her, I’d be more interested.”  
 “You’re such an asshole.”  
 “And you’re an angry fat bitch.”  
[linespace]  
After several months of wretched days and desolate nights I called Veterans Affairs. I was finally sick enough of myself to pick up the phone.

Getting therapy again was an uphill battle. Veterans Affairs had strict rules about who could see a therapist and for how long. Even though we had served our country loyally for 14 years and Steve had been injured at work, it did not mean we had carte blanche when it came to therapy. As his dependent, I was only allowed approximately four sessions on my own. This is not a typo. According to V.A., after four sessions, I should be fixed. I was allowed more sessions if Steve accompanied me. Eight in all. We were also limited in who we could see: the therapist had to be on the V.A.’s pre-approved list. Which meant the wait times were ridiculous. Also, we could not see a social worker. It had to be a registered psychiatrist. A pill-pusher. The kind of therapist that can give you a pill and send you on your merry way after four sessions. We had already tried that route in Petawawa.   
 “Steve, please come with me. We need this,” I pleaded.  
 “Dan, we’ve tried before. Those people are clueless. They have no idea what the military is like.”  
 “I know the last one was bad. OK, brutal. But we need to try again — for our marriage, for Owen.”  
[linespace]  
Our first session was worst than bad. It was horrible. Yet we felt united in some way because we couldn`t help but make eye contact with each other after the psychologist spent the first twenty minutes comparing her son’s policing career to that of a Canadian soldier serving overseas. Are you kidding me? Another crackpot? Like it’s a contest. Where do they find these people?  
 We were so dismayed by her ignorance that we only managed three sessions because we could no longer stomach any more stories about her 65-year-old husband and what they did to keep their connection strong. Hearing about them watching the local news together every night was not going to help us. We needed strategies. We needed an overhaul. She also made it clear that talking about our marriage before the accident was a waste of time and energy. “You need to focus on the present, never mind what happened before” she told us. “Just let it go, Danielle,” she scolded me, like I was being an unreasonable stubborn teen. But I needed to get it all out. The fact that Steve had never been there for me when I needed him, and now I was expected to be there for everything, and not complain one iota about it either. Steve now had an ally because he, too, thought it was unnecessary to talk about before. Even so, the process left us both demoralized. Nobody was equipped to deal with military marriages and their aftermath. Nobody even tried.   
 “Don’t ever ask me to go back to therapy.”  
 “But there are others out there, and we need help.”  
 “From what I can see, only people who need therapy get into therapy. These people can’t help us. I’m fine on my own.”  
 “But, we’re not Steve. We’re not fine.”  
 “I’m done with it, Dan.” There’s nothing more to say.  
[linespace]  
My time was up; I had used up all my hours. I was on the phone again trying to convince our latest liaison person at Veteran`s Affair that I was worthy of a few more sessions, even though by their standards, I should have been healed by now. My heart was still broken. My grief was still there. Sorry to inconvenience the system but I was going to need more time to work this shit out.   
 “We’re just following protocol, Mrs. Daniel.”  
 “It’s Mrs. Fraser and screw protocol. Use us and abuse us and if you break us then you’re done with us. That is the ARMY way. The military has taken enough from us. They are not going to take my marriage too, dammit! Do you know what it’s like to lose e-very-thing? We are not healing together. We are barely together. For fuck’s sake, can somebody fucking help us?” I said trembling at the kitchen table.  
 “I can understand your frustration.”  
 “No you can’t. Not unless you have lived this. I am so done begging for help. It shouldn’t be this hard.”  
 “I’ll make some calls and see what I can do. I will call you tomorrow. I promise.”

She called me back by the end of the following day. Somehow, she managed to break the rules and get me eight more sessions with a counsellor from a list. It didn’t have to be a psycologist this time, but it had to be someone from their list. After two weeks of waiting for the paper work and the insurance to be processed, I started seeing Beth. The one and the only sane therapist I had met since the accident. Steve refused to go, despite my pleas that she was the real deal. I couldn’t force him. His decision had been made.  
 I felt immediately at ease with Beth. She was motherly without being bossy. She had very kind green eyes and dark hair with wisps of grey. I could tell she had been through her share of heartbreak. Loss can smell loss. She was genuine and also cussed occasionally, which made me feel comfortable. I didn’t have to worry about offending her. I felt like I could open up to her right away and I did. I had waited so long. And in that small office with the box of Kleenex in front of me, I purged it all. All of the junk I hadn’t been able to share with anyone else: the indignation I felt towards Steve, the outrage I felt towards the military, my in-laws, the sense of abandonment, the fury towards my so-called friends who showed me who they really were in our time of greatest need.   
 “He doesn’t acknowledge any of it before the accident. Like breaking his back gives him a free pass to wipe it all clean. Like paraplegia has anointed him a saint or something,” I said seizing one, two, four tissues from the Kleenex box.  
 “Tell me about it. About before the accident,” said Beth, nestling into her chair.  
 “Well, I know I signed up for it, being a military wife and all. But he was never there for me, you know, even when he could have been, should have been,” I said, tearing the tissues in my hands.  
 “When was that Danielle? Give me a specific example.”  
 “When we lost our first baby,” I said. “He volunteered to go on course because he was sick of me crying. He just wanted me to get over it already.”  
 “I can understand how lonely that would have been.”  
 “Ya, lonely is one word for it.”  
 “Give me another, then.”  
 “Abandoned.”  
 “Is there another time you felt abandoned in your marriage?”  
 “Yes.”  
 “Tell me about it.”  
 I paused, staring at the painting that hung on the wall behind her, a water scene with two sailboats. My unspoken words hung in the air.   
 “It’s just you and me here,” she said.  
 “Well, after I had Owen,” I said. “Two weeks after my emergency C-section, he left us all alone, with no family nearby for help, to take a leadership course.” Beth, hadn’t moved a muscle, both hands sitting in her lap. “Leadership?” I said. “Just so he could gain one more notch in his belt to move him up the ranks so he could add another precious bar to his sleeve. What kind of leader leaves his wife and new-born son behind when he doesn’t have to?”  
 “How long was he gone for?”  
 “Three months.”  
 “That must have been very difficult.”  
 “Ya, and after *that* came Afghanistan — all in the same year.”

“It sounds to me like you were in survival mode during that year. How long after Afghanistan did Steve have his accident?”  
 “Four months. Four months after he came back from Afghanistan. I didn’t even have a chance to really tell him how furious I was with him that he left me alone for nine months to take care of our baby. I was just relieved that he was still alive. That’s what I was focused on at first, that we were still all together.”  
 “I’m sure.”

“I do have to tell you that I fell into another depression in between his coming home and the accident,” I said lowering my eyes.  
 “Well, that doesn’t surprise me. Your body was living in an acute state of stress for a whole year. You couldn’t go on like that, without any support and not have it affect you. Just hearing this information alone, I can comprehend the reasons for your anger. You’re only human.”  
 “To be honest Beth, I don’t think our marriage would have withstood another tour overseas. I had reached my limit.”  
 “Did Steve know this?”  
 “Oh, he knew. I was given my marching orders.”  
 “What do you mean?”  
 “He told me he would choose the army over our marriage. That I would lose, so don’t even bother asking. So I didn’t. And then he went away again on that stupid parachuting course, and he broke his back. And, well, now we’re here.”  
 “You forgot the other part,” said Beth.  
 “Which other part?”  
 “The part where you stood by his side for the last two years and helped him through his recovery. The part where you left your job and your life, to help his. The part where you loved him unconditionally.”  
 “Ya, there was that too,” I said snatching another tissue.  
 “Danielle, I don’t usually say things like this during a therapy session, but you have every right to be pissed off. To feel angry. I want you to know that you are not alone here.”  
 One person in the whole world accepted my pain, without asking me to shelve it or minimize it.  
 After several weeks of counselling, after I reached my paid sessional limit with Veteran’s Affairs, after I started paying out of pocket for each therapy session, I began to thoughtfully examine our marriage before and after the accident. I realized that Steve would never have stopped trying to climb the ladder. Never.   
 It was in that room that I learned how much I hated myself, how ugly I believed I was, and how much grief I had been carrying for years inside my bones. Beth helped me to connect the toxic way I was raised to my shattered self-worth and my on-going tolerance for receiving conditional-love.   
 “Tell me more about your father.”  
 “Oh boy.”  
 “It’s up to you, but I think it would help you see things more clearly with Steve. The patterns I mean.”  
 “Well, what can I say? I was terrified of him. He was a bad drunk. He still is, which is why I can’t be around him. Christmas morning was happy and jolly, but by the time the sun went down, the Christmas tree was flung against the walls and so we’re all our gifts, because “we were all a bunch of fucking spoiled brats.” He’s abusive and a genuine bully. He remembers only what he wants to remember and I can’t be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t admit the truth. I just wish he would respect MY boundaries and stay away, like I ask.”  
 “OK. that’s a lot of stuff,” Beth said with a smirk.  
 “Are you sorry you asked?”  
 “Not at all.”  
 “When were you most afraid of him?”  
 “After he got home from a night of drinking. He wouldn’t let any of us sleep. He would blare his music and yell for my mom from the downstairs kitchen table. Most nights I would get up and tell him to shut-up and my mom would stay in her room, while my two younger brothers tried to sleep. I became his punching bag of sorts. He called me every name in the book, the c-word was his favourite.”  
 “That sounds horrible.”  
 “I don’t know what bothered me more, knowing he was home and hearing him shout from the kitchen or lying awake in bed wondering when he would burst through that door. Sometimes he would bring his loser friends over. I was always on high alert. I’m still a light sleeper. He would be gone for days. Weeks even. My Mom never talked about his absence. We finally found out my father had left for good when my younger brother, while out with friends, saw him at a red light with a blonde. I can’t fix them. I used to think that was my job. Now, I just want to fix myself.”  
 “Well, it’s no wonder you struggle with self-esteem and trust. Not to mention what a healthy relationship should feel like. But you can work on this, Danielle. You don’t have to be that little girl, waiting for her father to barge in, trying to protect her mother or worrying about her husband cheating on her, like your dad did.”  
[linespace]  
Steve noticed a change in me. After several months in therapy, I was now working towards opening a shop with my cousin, giving classes on beading and sewing. It was something I had wanted to do in Petawawa before Steve’s accident, but I never had a chance to make it happen.  
 “I just don’t understand why you won’t go back to teaching.”  
 “Because I don’t want to teach anymore. It suffocates me. I want to do something creative. I need a new beginning, too.”  
 “Well, Dan, I’m taking business right now and I know for a fact that most businesses fail in the first year.”  
 “Thanks for your stellar support Steve. I can always count on you to give me a good dose of encouragement.”  
 “Whatever, just keep me out of it. You’re on your own with this.”

My days were becoming full again. I was slowly emerging out of my depression with continued talk-therapy and medication. I started to build a solid business plan with my cousin and realized that creating something new was feeding me. Still, I begged Steve to get plugged into our marriage, to spend more time together, to care more. Instead, he focused on the outside world, all things and persons non-family.   
 He started rowing. He had met a woman through wheel-chair basketball who invited him to try adaptive rowing. It wasn’t long until he broke the Canadian indoor Championship record. He’s just that kind of guy. He had only been rowing for a few months and now he had a new challenge. Because of his success, he was invited to try out for the National Rowing Team to represent Canada at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. He made the team — of course. Steve created a binder with his sports psychologist, marked “Beijing 2008”on the cover. It sat on our kitchen counter. It might as well have been his orders for a new mission overseas to Afghanistan.  
 He was now preparing for The Games. His days were filled with school, training, and motivational speaking. Our family was still in second or third or fifth place, too far behind him for him to see us clearly. I pleaded with him to put my name on that binder too; or to make a binder with June 20, 1998 on it, our wedding day. I was beyond tired of living a life alone. It was hard enough to tolerate when he was overseas, calling from a satellite phone, now he was in the next room, less than twenty steps away. It might as well have been oceans between us.   
[linespace]  
In the beginning, I prayed the accident would change him. I would finally have him home. I wouldn’t have to share him with the army anymore. I gotcha now. I knew our marriage was in the danger-zone after Afghanistan. I thought maybe this grounding would save us. I was wrong. He’d just substituted his obligation to the military with commitment to his sport. Transferred allegiance from the generals and lieutenants and his buddies in the field to his coaches and his teammates, all the people who wanted him to shine, once again.   
[linespace]  
After months of therapy, I finally accepted that my marriage was in jeopardy. Screwing up my courage, I marched into his office for one last desperate appeal.  
 “Steve, do you have a minute?”  
 “Not really. Can it wait?”  
 “No, it can’t.”  
 He turned his head towards me as I stood over him. He didn’t have another chair in his office.  
 “What is it? I have to send out this email.”  
 “Steve, you know that I love you,” I said, careful with my words. “ I do. I still love you. But I just can’t go on like this.” My eyes were filling with tears.  
 “This hasn’t been fun for me either.”  
 “I know. It’s just, I’m so tired of fighting and asking for things to change and, I just can’t do it anymore.”  
 “So what are you saying?” He said finally turning his body towards me.  
 “I’m saying that I need you to be the one to fight right now — for us. I have given you all I have.”  
 “Shouldn’t it be a two-way street?” He said, pushing himself away from his desk.  
 “It’s never been a two-way street,” I shot back. “It has always been what you wanted and what you needed while I waited for you. I’m done waiting.”  
 “Nobody asked you.”  
 “Well that’s what a marriage is, Steve, and for the last ten years, I’m the only one who has compromised in this marriage.”  
 “Well Dan, to be honest, I’m doing the best I can right now, with school and rowing and — I don’t see how I can give anymore. Maybe I just can’t give you what you need.”  
 “Steve, I’m begging you. I’m in overdraft here. I have nothing left,” I said exposing my empty hands. “If you want to stay married, you need to try harder. You need to be all in.”  
 He nodded his head. “I need to get this done.”  
 The parachuting accident had not changed him. It had not changed our marriage either. It had bought us time, that’s all.

9’er Domestic  
[*9'er domestic*](http://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=9%27er_domestic&action=edit&redlink=1)*: Refers to a soldier's spouse.*

“Shaved or Sliced?”  
 “I said, shaved or sliced?”   
 “Hey lady, tell me how you want it.”  
 I stared at him and the peach fuzz above his lip, glanced at the chunk of chicken he was holding up in the air, and turned and walked out without saying a word. I left my cart and hiked out of the grocery store, abandoning my food, the strawberries and grapes that Owen and Steve both adored. I scurried to my car, slammed the door and had barely started driving when the tears gushed down my face. I had no idea where I was going. It just had to be anywhere but here.  
 I pushed down hard on the gas and turned up the music to the max as I drove down the highway that stretched between my home and the city. The tears continued to drench my face. I didn’t care who saw me. I had reached the breaking point, the point of no return. I was done. My counsellor Beth and I had discussed this possibility that one day it would just be too much.   
 “How long do you think you can go on like this?” she asked me.  
 “I don’t know, really. I just keep hoping that he’ll get it one day and things will change.”  
 “Danielle, that’s unlikely.”  
 “I know but I still love him, even though it’s getting harder,” I said.   
 “I know you do. But do you love yourself, too?”  
 I was there. I could no longer wait for Steve to see me, to get plugged into our life together. I needed more from this marriage, more from the man I had given every single part of myself to since I was nineteen years old. I forced myself to see through the tears, to focus on the road. I didn’t care about the groceries sitting in the cart or the supper that was expected on the table. I just kept driving.   
 I had started going out. Partying like I was in my 20’s again. The more that Steve trained, the more I drank myself into oblivion. We were now galaxies apart. I no longer had the words, nor the will to make him see what he was losing. The weekend before, I had gone out with my cousin and her friends, who had become my friends. While they drank and danced to blow off steam about the monotony of their work-life, their husbands and kids, I drank to forget. The talk therapy helped me, but I still had countless layers of grief, anger and loss caked to my ribcage. Late one night as our bodies bumped against strangers on the dance floor and strobe lights flashed against our faces, I felt an arm grab me and pull me into his chest. I felt his shirt damp with sweat as I wrapped my arm around his back, without hesitating. I let the music carry me while my head spinned from too many tequila shots. He brought me in closer, I could feel his jaw against my cheek, his hot breath against my neck. While I tried to lose myself in the music, my head started to clear as memories of Steve’s body against mine started spinning around me. My knees buckled and I lost my balance. He brought me in closer, pressing himself into me, the music vibrating against our limbs. My face was suddenly wet with tears, even though I hadn’t felt them fall at all. Thoughts flashed to the day in our living room, when Steve sang in my ear as he squeezed me against his body, so lovingly. How we moved across our living-room floor barefoot, while the afternoon sun poured in. How he pulled back, looked into my eyes and told me that he loved me. “We’re meant for each other Dan.” A hand was now touching the small of my back and all I could think of was that this guy was not the one. I would never dance with the one again. Tears continued to fall as I realized that even though my husband did not love me any more, I only wanted to dance with him.   
 We had fallen so far.   
 “What’s your name,” the man asked as I scrambled away before the song ended, wiping the tears from my face. I left the bar after finding my cousin, telling her I wanted to leave. I took a cab home. During the 30-minute drive back home, I convinced myself that I was going to tell Steve the truth. That I was dying inside. That I couldn’t grieve in secret anymore. That I hungered for intimacy. That I was worthy of love. I wanted him to say that he would meet me halfway, that our love would conquer it all. I wanted to hear these words more than anything.  
 I locked the door behind me, tore my clothes off and crawled into bed. Steve sighed loudly, letting me know he was annoyed. It was after 1am. I wept as I shifted to find a comfortable position in my single bed with the line in the middle. I didn’t care that he could hear me. I wanted him to hear me. I crept towards the line that divided us. I knew it wasn’t a good time to talk, but there never was a good time. He was always too busy, or on his way somewhere. Always anywhere but here. Besides, I had truth serum pouring through my veins: five shots of tequila and four beers at my last count.  
 “Go sleep downstairs,” he said without any concern in his voice.   
 “Steve,” I said, “I really need to talk to you. Please,” I cried.  
 “I mean it Dan. You reek of booze and I have to get up early. Just go.” Not a speck of affection in between his words.  
 I sighed even louder than he had and I heaved myself out of bed, grabbing my pillow and headed to the downstairs bedroom while my head continued to spin. I climbed into our old sleigh bed; the one we both slept in before. I tossed every pillow off of the bed and after sobbing for another hour, eventually fell asleep, overcome with sadness.  
[linespace]  
This was not the life I planned. I never wanted a broken marriage. Like the one I grew up in. I didn’t want that for my son. Not ever. Kids don’t adapt. I knew this for a fact. My biggest fear when I said yes to Steve’s proposal was that I might fail at this. And now I had.   
 I drove around, looking for answers, avoiding my husband and son. Without planning it, I ended at my childhood home, a white two-storey duplex in the wrong part of the city. The house where my parent’s marriage crumbled; where alcoholism stole my innocence, where I lost my virginity, and where violence made me doubt everything. This was the house where I began to despise my father and lose respect for my mother. The one that smelled of Miller and Player’s Light, King-Size, where I learned to settle for crumbs of love. The one where porn was left in our upstairs bathroom, an unfair comparison to my 13-year-old body. The one where my father walked in and walked out, until he walked out for good. The one where I convinced my mother that life was worth living and could she please eat just a little.   
 This was the house where I learned to be a fighter, a protector. The person who says go-fuck-yourself. I thought about what Beth had said during one of our sessions. How there had been patterns in my life. “You don’t get anywhere overnight,” she said. “Good or bad.” [linespace]  
I kept driving with my tear-stained face. I drove downtown, towards my grandmother’s house, my mother’s mother, my sweet mémère. Towards the house where she babysat me, after my mom went back to work. The one that smells of “la soupe orange” and “gruillot,” hot coffee and unconditional love. The house that gushes with stories, strength, prayer and loss. The beacon that restored my innocence and that offered me respite, without judgement.   
 I spotted Mémère as I drove by, sweeping her front veranda, a blue handkerchief tied around her head. Grief struck me as I gripped the steering wheel and made the turn. I knew I would lose her some day, too, and no matter what; it would always be too soon. My heart could not bear to even think it. I pushed against the accelerator and kept driving, still wiping the tears from my face.  
 I drove to the cemetery where Cindy, my friend was laid to rest when we were both just 16. The one who was with me the night I looked out my bedroom window and saw my father in the arms of another woman. I remembered her perfect smile and sparkly blue eyes and wondered where she would be today if she would have turned away from me, too, if her life hadn’t ended in a car wrapped around a pole.   
 I looked at the clock blinking on my dash. I had been gone three hours. I was on the other side of town and needed to get home. But something in me had snapped that morning and could not be repaired — the levee no longer regulating the levels, the waters now rushing all around me.   
 As I drove towards the suburbs, I made a promise to myself. I would leave as soon as the Paralympics were over. I didn’t want to be the reason why Steve didn’t compete as well as he could have. I didn’t want him to hold that over my head, too. I had to keep it from him until then. I was already committed to going to Beijing; the plane ticket was bought. This trip would be my final duty as his wife. After that, I would pick up the pieces of my life and learn to make myself happy again. Maybe for the first time.   
[linespace]  
“Where were you all day?”  
 “Driving.”  
 “I tried calling. You could have let me know. I was hoping to get some time on the water this afternoon.”  
 “Sorry, I totally lost track.”  
 “I thought you were getting groceries?”  
 “I’ll get them tomorrow. I’ll make supper now.”  
 “Whatever. I’m going to my office. Owen is at the neighbours’ playing.”  
 I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge door, biting hard on my lip. Supper was on the table less than an hour later. The following afternoon, the fridge was fully stocked.  
[linespace]  
I’d made the decision and I was sticking to it, but how to tell Steve? How to tell our family? Our friends?  
 “I know what everyone will think. That I couldn’t accept him because of his paralysis.”  
 “But, what’s the truth here?” asked Beth.  
 “It doesn’t matter. Who leaves a man in a wheelchair? A veteran,” I said now chewing my nails.   
 “Danielle, take a breath. Tell me what the truth is.”  
 “That I accept him, but he can’t accept me. That I need more time to grieve, and he won’t allow it. He won’t let me feel it all,” I said, kicking the legs of the coffee table. “I can’t exist in the box he wants me to occupy. I can’t live with the constant disappointment in his eyes. It’s killing me.”  
 “You know the difference, no matter what anyone thinks or doesn’t think.”  
 “I know, but I’m the one who looks like the asshole. The neighbours are one thing, but the thought of dealing with family is another story. His parents will despise me, his brother, his sister — even though we’re not close.”  
 “You’ve just solved another problem,” said Beth. “Don’t give any weight to the relationships you don’t value.”  
 “Name three people who you really care about that will be affected by this separation.”  
 “Steve, Owen and my mom.”  
 “OK. Let’s focus on these three people.”  
[linespace]  
While I was planning my exit, my great escape from the only man I ever truly loved, Steve was planning for his world-stage challenge: the single-scull 1km race at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. Every morning he woke up at 4 am, so he could be on the water by 5:30 am and train. His day was filled with classes and schoolwork and after school he spent time at the gym or back on the water. Weekends were filled with more training or competitions that took him away and boundless opportunities for him to speak publicly about his triumphant attitude and fighting spirit. He was already a winner, an inspiration, an absolute super-human, respected and admired. His face had become a constant in the local newspapers. Every turn I made, I saw his photo, his story, his astounding success. Owen and I were pushed to the very back of his life, once again, forced to eat suppers alone. Sure he asked us to come by the lake and watch him train so we could be ‘together’ but I could no longer stomach it. I continued to raise my son alone.  
[linespace]  
“Hi Danielle! Oh! Thank God the bus is late. I just made it back from town,” she said with her toddler wobbling at her legs. “Stay here Paige. So, how are you? I keep seeing Steve everywhere. You must be so proud of him, he’s famous!”  
 “Yup, he’s a super-star all right.”  
 “So, is he excited? Are you going? You’re going to Beijing, right? Oh my God! You guys are so amazing.”  
 “Uh, yes, I’ll be there. My ticket has been purchased.”  
 “I have to admit something to you. Whenever I’m having a bad day, I think of Steve and you, and I give myself a little pep talk. You know. You guys are like crazy-inspiring.”  
 “Wow. OK. That’s really nice Cindy — ”   
 “There’s the bus. Look at the bus, Paige”, she said clapping her hands and jumping up and down.  
 I couldn’t go anywhere without people stuffing me with praise about my incredible husband. I wanted to tell them the truth, that he was a hero all right, but that he loved me not — that I was the hole in his bucket. Instead, I played the role of the good wife and gave them my million-dollar-smile. This constant chipping away at my soul only reinforced my decision. I was done selling myself out. The clock was ticking.   
[linespace]   
I don’t think Steve really noticed I was done until it was too late. His commitments, his interviews, and his training became all consuming. It was heart-wrenching because on the outside looking in, I was still proud of him — a starry-eyed-fan impressed by his accomplishments and his ability to soar in all aspects of his life. But on the inside looking out, I felt betrayed. Unappreciated. Unimportant. Unlovable. And forever unable to measure up to his expectations.   
 *Is there anything he can’t do?* Actually yes, let me count the ways. Pull up a chair. Let me tell you. Do you want *this* on *TSN*, *CTV*, or *The National*, Steve?   
 “Steve, have you seen my keys?” I asked as I sprinted from one room to the next combing every possible surface.  
 “Nope.”  
 “Jesus. Well, can you help me find them? I’m going to be late for the beading class.”  
 “You never put your shit away. Just hang them on the hook. It’s not hard.”  
 “I don’t need you to patronize me, I need your help. For God’s sake, is that too much to ask? After everything I do for you?”  
 “You know Dan, I’ve been thinking, the only time I feel shitty is when I’m around you,” he said, now facing the kitchen.  
 “Well maybe it’s because I’m the only one on planet earth not flying my freak-flag for Steve Daniel. Sorry for not making you feel like a winner at home, Your Grace,” I said retrieving my keys from the wicker basket I had already looked in, twice.  
 “You’re crazy, like nut-job crazy. You and your counsellor belong together,” he said as I grabbed my purse.   
 “Sorry for ruining *your* life Steve,” I said as I closed the door. His words lingered above me as I drove into town, like a lethal gas. I continued to say nothing about my planned exodus. I kept it inside. I spilled nothing except with Beth as I continued my therapy. It was only there that I let it out in bombastic chunks of agony.  
[linespace]  
“So are you sure you have everything?” I asked.  
 “I think I do,” he said.  
 “I’m sure you do, but message me if you forgot anything and I will pack it in my suitcase.”  
 “So, you’re still coming, right?”  
 “Of course. I told you I’d be there.”  
 “I know, but — ”  
 “Owen, come and say bye to Daddy. Remember, we have something special to give him.”  
 The sound of his little pitter-patter-socked-feet filled the hall. He looked so proud as he waited for me to give him the scrapbook I had made for his dad. My last love letter. “What’s this?” Steve asked surprised.  
 “Just some messages and well-wishes from your parents, your brother, your sister, friends and neighbours. Pretty much everyone,” I added. “It’s a journal filled with good luck messages, quotes and drawings, made by me and Owen.”  
 “Dan, I’m — thank-you. For everything,” he said, his eyes getting watery.  
 I looked away. “It’s who I am Steve, it’s in my genes. I can’t help but do this kind of thing. Well, Owen, give your daddy a kiss and a good luck hug. We don’t want him to miss his flight.”  
 I watched as Owen climbed up and onto his lap wrapping his arms around his father’s neck. My heart cracked once more. I kissed Steve’s cheek and patted his back.   
 “Now go kick some Paralympic ass.”  
 He paused before he rolled out into the garage.  
 “Dan, thank-you for this,” he said, “I’m really looking forward to reading it on the plane. I didn’t think — ”  
 “I’m glad,” I said. “I’m happy I was able to keep it a secret until now.”   
 Unlike all of the other times he had left, I didn’t watch his car disappear. I closed the door and locked it. I leaned against the wall and ripped out the elastic from my hair and let my hair fall unto my shoulders, rubbing my scalp with both hands. I exhaled deeply and went to the kitchen, turning on the music and pouring myself a glass of red wine.   
 “Let’s get your trains out, Owen.”  
 [linespace]  
I started to picture a life alone. With every day that passed, I felt better in my skin. I could breathe easier without the weight of pretending. But, there was still so much to do before I left for China. And as much as I loved to travel, I did not look forward to being in Beijing, especially since getting the news a while back that we were no longer “viable candidates for adoption.” We had started the paperwork to adopt a little girl from China, something we had both committed to doing together, about six months after moving back to the North. But, after a few months into the process, we received an email from our adoption agency expressing their regret that China no longer allowed anyone with disabilities to adopt their (throw-away) daughters. We also had to make a combined 80, 000 thousand dollars a year. I hated China. I hated that they were hosting the Paralympics in China. That experience was one more loss I’d had to absorb during. One more thing that wasn’t fair. As I crossed the days off on the calendar, I knew I’d have to suck it up one last time, on the world stage in a country I just wanted to give the bird to.   
[linespace]  
I flew fourteen hours by myself to the other side of the world, a direct flight. I started biting my nails before I drove to Toronto from Sudbury, where my flight would leave for Beijing, even nail polish couldn’t stop the gnawing. I stayed overnight at an airport hotel where I would leave my car for the next week. My flight was first thing the next morning. My in-laws were taking care of Owen as my mom was back teaching again.  
 I didn’t speak to a soul as I waited to board the wide-bodied 767. I was consumed with my silence and the great final act that I would have to perform.  
 Steve left with his team and an array of coaches by his side. I’m sure he felt like a rock star as he traveled with his full regalia and Canada’s colors on his back. I’m sure he didn’t even think of me once traveling alone across the oceans to cheer him on.   
 Nobody spoke any English from the time I landed at the Beijing airport. I managed to hail a taxi and pointed to the name of my hotel on my photocopied hotel confirmation. I prayed I wouldn’t end up in some sex-slaved hole for the rest of my life. Thankfully, I arrived at the correct hotel where I met my new friend Connie, the wife of another rower that I’d be sharing a room with. I slept until the following day.  
[linespace]  
Steve and I planned to meet near Athlete’s Village. It was the day before his competition so he couldn’t venture far. The cab dropped me off and instantly I felt swarmed by crowds as they brushed by me in their country’s colors with their plastic I.D cards dangling around their necks. The venue was impressive with bold colors, festive. The hypocrisy was thick in the air. Their government wanted to show the world how spectacular and forward they had become, but meanwhile they still killed baby girls and barely tolerated disabled people. What a farce. Eff you, China. I turned around and saw him, wheeling towards me, a pale smile on his face. My eyes locked onto him and I forced a smile too. Gone were the days where my heart would skip a beat and I could barely breathe waiting to greet and put my wanting arms around him. Confirmation. I was detached.   
 “Ni Hao,” he said letting a full smile cross his face.  
 “Well hello there,” I said.   
 “Welcome to Beijing,” he said as I awkwardly hugged him and patted his back. “So what do you think so far?”  
 “There’s a lot of people in this part of the world,” I said.  
 “Ya, even more with the rest of the world coming to see the spectacle. Did you see me in the Opening Ceremonies?”  
 “I did catch of glimpse of you on CTV. Pretty cool.”  
 “Well, I can’t stay long because I have a meeting with my coaches before dinner and then I have to get my head ready for the race.”  
 “That’s OK,” I said, relieved that I wouldn’t have play a role any more that day.  
 “Let’s take a stroll out this way,” he said. I followed him.  
[linespace]  
I took a 40-minute cab to the rowing event. I passed dozens of poor neighbourhoods that had large white portable walls to hide the real China. Poverty that littered the rural landscapes with garbage and laundry strung across the lands. I only caught the snippets in between the white walls as the cab drove along the long highway. I wondered if that adoption would have changed us, made us stronger. I would never know.  
 I cheered, I screamed, and I supported him as he raced. I sat with other family members of the Canadian team and tried to blend in even though I was struggling with the heat and the reality that my marriage would soon be over. Steve placed fourth in his heat and would race again the following day in the semi-finals. I was an outsider looking in, still playing my starring part; the wife of the veteran and now the paralympian.   
 Steve knew something was wrong when we first saw each other after his race.  
 “Ni Hao! Great race,” I said, as I greeted him in the ‘family and friends’ tent. “Thanks, but it would have been better if my oars would have made it. Good old Air Canada. They broke them on the flight.”  
 “You never told me that. That’s insane! I’m so sorry. Of course they don’t show *that* on their commercials. Well, I think you did great. You haven’t been doing this for very long, remember?”  
 “I guess so,” he said, puffing out his cheeks. “The semi-finals will be tomorrow afternoon. Hopefully I’ll have a better race.”  
 “So, what did you do today?”  
 “Connie and I went sightseeing. I think we ended up in a less touristy area. But the food was really good. Authentic. No Mc-D’s in sight, you know,” I said averting his eyes.  
 “Something wrong?”  
 “Nothing really. Still trying to get used to the time difference.”  
 “Yeah. I’m glad we got here early last week to acclimate to the time and heat.”  
 “For sure.”  
 “Dan, seriously, what’s wrong? You seem different,” he said, eyes wide and unblinking.  
 “Nothing.”  
 “It *is* something. I can tell.”  
 “It’s not something I want to talk about *here*, Steve.”  
 “Just tell me.”  
 “I’d really rather not — ”  
 “I don’t care where we are, something is really off with you. What is it?” he said, like he was done pretending as well.  
 “I think we should talk about this when we get home. This is not the place and definitely not the time,” I said.  
 His eyes filled quickly with tears. And then mine. And I knew that he knew.   
 “We’re not leaving until you tell me,” he said.  
 “Geez. Fine. I, I just can’t do this anymore. I’m done Steve.” He glared at me. Held his tongue.  
 “Why did you even come here then?”   
 “Because, I said I would and I wasn’t going to let you be alone in China. Nobody deserves that.”  
 “You should have just stayed home. You’re right. We’ll talk about this later,” he said as other athletes started to enter the tent.  
 I nodded.   
 “I’m heading back to the athlete’s village to debrief the race and prepare for the next one. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”  
 “Ya, I’ll take a cab here and meet you after the race,” I said, barely audible.  
[linespace]  
The next day he finished his final race placing eleventh overall in the world in his arms-only single scull category. He raced his heart out despite borrowing ill-fitting oars from the Canadian team. I saw him in the tent again but other athletes and coaches surrounded him. I met several people as I tried to make my way towards him, yes, I’m Steve Daniel’s wife, yes, so proud, shook their hands and then left again for another night at the hotel. We hadn’t said anything to each other about the day before.   
 “I just want to get back to rest,” he said, averting my eyes.  
 “Oh. OK. I guess we’ll see each other tomorrow, then?”  
 “Ya, I’ll call your room.”  
[linespace]  
The following morning, he met me at the hotel. We had planned to spend two days together exploring the great city of Beijing, before my news was pried out of me. I shifted from one foot to the other waiting for him to arrive. His taxi pulled up and he transferred back into his chair.  
 “Hey.”  
 “Hey.”  
 “How has it been at Athletes Village?”  
 “It’s like Disney world for athletes. They’re spoiling us rotten. You should see some of the athletes wolf down five Big Macs.”  
 “What? Talk about healthy eating for high-performing athletes. So, do you still want to do this today, I mean — tour the city?”  
 “I thought about it all night Dan, about what you said.”  
 “You did?”  
 “The thing is, I haven’t been happy for a long time either. I think we should give this a try. Take a break I mean.”  
 “Oh. Wow. OK then,” I said, a pang of sadness shooting across my heart.  
 “Ya, I think that’s what I wanted, too. I just didn’t have the guts to say it out loud, like you.”  
 “Well then, this is a surprise.”  
 “Let’s just try to enjoy this ancient city while we’re here. We’ll never be back here again.”  
 “That’s for sure.”  
[linespace]  
I pushed him up and down the great sites of the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and even attended an evening circus acrobat show with child-gymnasts. We were on the edge of our seats all night as we worried about witnessing a spinal cord injury, making sick jokes that this was how China must recruit their Paralympic athletes. We were still a team when trying to summon a taxi. They wouldn’t stop if they saw Steve in is his wheelchair, so he hid, while I hailed and then tried to explain using my hands that his chair broke down and we could get into his cab. Half a dozen drove away, as I yelled profanities in English. Steve stopped me from causing any more of a scene as I yelled from the top of my lungs that China was a disgusting hypocritical country where their cabbies wouldn’t even stop to pick up Paralympic athletes because of their wheelchairs. “Mark my words China, I will tell the truth about how you really treated the athletes during your precious Games!”  
 “You’re going to get yourself locked up Dan!” He said.  
 We were polite with each other. Cordial. Even in our unravelling marriage, we were civil and kind. There was no attempt to change the outcome of our separation, by either of us. When I look back on it now, I was secretly hoping that he would beg me to stay, to make it work, to try one more time. I was hoping he would fight for me in that last hour. While we slept inches apart in our hotel room, the night before I left for Canadian soil, I listened all night long as he shifted and turned in his sleep, hoping he would put his arm around my body, pull me in and tell me everything I wanted to hear. That I was enough and he would do whatever it took to save our marriage. *Please don’t go. It can’t be over, not after everything we’ve been through.* But he didn’t. He stayed on his side and I stayed on mine.  
[linespace]  
He was to visit in Beijing for another week with Team Canada to enjoy the rest of the Games and take part in the closing ceremonies. I was to go home and plot the next chapter of my life, as a single mom.  
 “Well, they’re calling a cab for me,” I said.  
 “I hope you have a good flight back,” he said, reaching for my hand then changing his mind.  
 “Me too.”  
 “Tell Owen, I’ll be bringing back all kinds of loot for him.”   
 “I will,” I said my eyes tearing up.  
 “OK, then. We’ll talk about everything when I get back,” he said.  
 “Ya.”  
 “I’m glad you came, even if — ”  
 “Me too, it would have been weird not be to here to watch you race, after everything.”  
 “For me, too.”  
 “I’m proud of you — ”  
 “Hey Papito! You got in late last night,” Steve said to his roommate, also a rower from Canada, while they did some kind of handshake. Papito was there visiting his wife as well, the girl I had been touring Beijing with.   
 “My cab is here Steve, I have to go.”  
 “OK,” he said as I leaned in to hug him. He hugged me back like I was one of his friends, going off on Christmas holidays. Not his wife of ten years who was about to leave his life. I held back my tears, pushing the lump in my throat to the very back.  
 “Safe travels,” he said as I turned toward the cab.  
 I stepped away; clutching my luggage handle for balance, leaning onto the car and falling into the backseat, while the driver heaved my bag into the trunk and slammed it. I looked back at Steve, praying, trying to will him to look back at me too. Just one last time — a crumb of intimacy still between us. I watched him as he continued his conversation with his roommate, laughing, as I drove away from him, and the city of twelve million people. He never looked back. Not even to say good-bye. Not even after everything. Not once.  
 I know, because I watched, my eyes fixed on him until he was just a speck.

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The last time I cried on a plane, I was leaving Paris. We had hopped from train to train across France, Italy, and Spain for three weeks while he was on leave from his Bosnia Tour. He kept kissing my hand, my cheeks, lips. Newlyweds after three years of marriage: at least we could thank the military for that. We’d been apart so much it was hardly as if we’d been married at all.  
 The final call came for my flight back to Canada. Steve was staying one more night in Paris and then he was heading back for four more months in Bosnia. I kept it together until the very end, until our fingers no longer touched. And then, the massive gate shouldering my emotions busted open, hinges and all. I gasped for air, throwing my head upward as I tried to swallow the boulder that was trapped inside my throat. I could no longer breathe, the weight intolerable. I turned away from him, left him standing there as my heart shattered into the tiniest of pieces. I walked through the tunnel and onto the plane where I anchored my body to 34A, grateful I had enough foresight to book a window seat for the way home. I wiped at the tears for eight hours, over the sea, until my tissues became powder in my hands. I did not read, I did not whisper a single word to the woman squeezed against me. She knew better than to ask.   
 But that was before.  
[linespace]  
Three days after Steve returned from Beijing, barely over the jetlag, I told him I was leaving. I was planning on waiting a week before bringing it up, because he was starting a new semester at school and he’d already missed the first week of classes of his third year due to the Paralympic Games. I thought I should give him a grace period. But, the truth is, I couldn’t live another minute without being real, not one more microsecond. The charade was ending today. Owen was already at school and Steve hadn’t yet left for the day.  
 “I’m buying a house,” I blurted out, as I watched him stuffing his backpack with binders, my words bouncing around him.  
 “You’re what?” he said.   
 “I’ve been looking for apartments but there aren’t any two bedrooms for less than a thousand a month that isn’t a roach motel,” I said, in my this-is-absolutely-non-negotiable-voice.  
 “You’ve already looked?”   
 “Yes,” I said. “This house is mine, too. I own equity.”   
 “I know. I’m not going to fight you, Dan. I just didn’t think you were scheming while I was gone,” he said.  
 “A lot’s been happening while you were training for the GOLD.”  
 “Nice.”  
 “This decision wasn’t made overnight. It took me a year in therapy — ”  
 “You and your damn therapy.”   
 “I’ll call the realtor tomorrow.”

[linespace]  
We continued to sleep in the same bed for three weeks — the line between us now an impassable barrier. I saw eight houses before I found the one I put an offer on; a one-and-a-half-storey yellow stucco house with mature trees lining the ridge of a small mountain in the back yard. The pickings were beyond slim and I was desperate to find a safe home for Owen. All the others were by train tacks or beside houses with permanent yard sales. This one was on a crescent and the neighbourhood felt safe. It was also close to downtown, where my bead store was located and closer to the College where I started teaching English, part-time. I won the bidding war and moved in one month later, in October. Steve bought me out of the house we owned together, and I used this money to purchase the new one. I also planned on using some of it as a cushion until the store made more money.   
 I continued to make supper for all three of us, but I ate alone in my room. Steve barely said a word to me, our paths crossing only when we had too. He spent more time in his office and only climbed into bed when I was already sleeping. I started picking up boxes and packing up my books and art supplies when Owen went to bed. I made lists of everything I had to do and places I had to call; Hydro, Gas, telephone hook-up. Steve had never before been the one left behind. This was new territory for the both of us.   
 We lied to Owen. We told him we’d be living in separate houses because I needed to live close to where I worked. Steve would stay in the big house and I would live in the small house. Owen would split his time in both. He would go to the same school and I would drive him in and pick him up at the bus stop after school.   
 He was five.   
 He believed us.  
[linespace]  
The day I moved out, Owen was with my mom on Manitoulin Island. I didn’t want the memory of our parting to sit with him forever, a nightmare where he watched his mother drive away with her belongings, away from the house he lived in. It was a sunny and cold autumn day. My boxes were packed but I left all the furniture, the kitchen appliances and all of the pictures on the wall. I wanted the house to look undisturbed, the same as always for Owen.   
 Steve was home and seemed unbothered, almost jovial as he watched my brother, my best friend Melanie and her husband load the boxes into the U-Haul.   
 “Are you going somewhere?” Steve asked, grinning, as he watched us pile boxes into the truck.  
 “You’re freakin hilarious,” I said. “A real comedian. You should take that shit on the road.”   
 After the first load was ready, I went to find Steve. He was in the bathroom.  
 “Hey,” I knocked. “Can I come in?”  
 “Ya, it’s open.”  
 “Are you OK?” I asked, letting a self-conscious smile slip across my face.  
 “Ya, I’m OK,” he said echoing my uncomfortable smile. I knew it was coming. It’s you I’m worried about.”  
 “Me? What for? I never wanted *this*. I just can’t live the way we’ve been living. And, I don’t want Owen to see the worst in us and that’s what’ll happen if I stay.”  
 “Well, we both agree on that.”  
 “Who knows,” I said, “Maybe we can be the next Demi Moore and Bruce Willis? They seem to be good friends despite going their own ways.”  
 “You never know,” he answered.  
 I didn’t look back. I walked out the door and into the cold air, away from my suburban lifestyle, my status quo, and the place I felt I didn’t belong. I drove to the new-old small house and unloaded the boxes. My brother and Melanie’s husband headed back to pick up the second and final load while I unpacked my books, my kitchen, my bedroom.  
 It only took half the day to empty every box and arrange the little furniture I had brought with me. My sleigh bed had been assembled; the one Steve and I shared before the accident, before everything. I also took the first couches we had purchased as a married couple, the ones that had been sitting in the basement rec-room. And the wooden kitchen table too; the generic one that was in all the PMQ’s, bought at the Brick after we got our first house; table and chairs that were obtained on credit — don’t pay for a year. No interest, no fees, no problem. I didn’t have any dishes, or toaster or even a kettle. I didn’t have the heart to separate all the things that we had bought and built together. I didn’t want to be reminded of the memories that illustrated every single thing we had acquired in our ten years of marriage. Like the lime green dishes I adored from the Bay, the ones I had wanted so desperately. I had pleaded with Steve for twenty minutes, both of us standing in the aisle, my hands on my hips and he finally gave in — a set of eight, just in case we broke some along the way. Now only six plates left. I left them all.  
 My Mom had an extra single-bed frame and mattress for Owen’s room. I didn’t have a dresser for his clothes, so I just hung them up. His room was pink but would soon become a medium tone green. I wanted to make this room as special as the one he had in the big house. It was small but it had a lovely window that faced the falling leaves from the maples in the back yard. It also had a large closet that could be a cool cabin if I could get some lighting in there. I bought a red tool chest on wheels to store his toys and belongings. He thought it was cool to have his own red metal tool chest, like his dad. I also bought him fish, since our dog Molly stayed at the big house with Dad. (Another loss.) She needed the fenced-in yard because she liked to run wild. I wasn’t very good at taking care of fish. Orange Fish and Flipper only lasted two weeks. I found them one morning, belly-up after a weekend of drinking. I sauntered in Owen’s bedroom to feed them their stinky flecks of food, but it was too late. I scooped them out with the tiny red net and chucked their little bodies into the toilet. Plop, plop. I watched them swirl around the toilet bowl as I flushed them down into the void. Yet another disappointment I would have to narrate to my son, fashioned by his Mama. I was now a murderer. I felt horrible. And yet, I was relieved that I didn’t have to be responsible for them anymore.  
 I was fond of the coziness of a small house; it was about fifty years old. It had character; unlike our brand new wheelchair-accessible house we had built in the burbs. It had story. I loved the hard wooden floors that creaked under my feet in the morning, the sound of the furnace kicking in. I learned to love my retro baby blue bathroom; the toilet, tub and sink all blue.  
[linespace]   
Steve and I split custody of Owen equally. Without drama.   
 “Hey, how was your weekend Owen?” Steve asked, rolling down his window as he came up to pick him up on a Sunday.  
 “Hi Daddy,” Owen said, waving, carefully walking down the steps.  
 “Good, I took him to see the new Madagascar Movie,” I said.   
 “Anything I need to know,” Steve asked watching Owen climb into the truck.  
 “No, he’s eating well and all systems are a go,” I said.  
 “Good,” he nodded, keeping his eyes on Owen.  
 “Ya. Just let me give him one more kiss. Muah! I love you Owen,” I said as I squished his cheek with my mouth. “I’ll see you soon,” I said trying not to let my voice tremble.  
 “Bye mama,” Owen said in a small voice.  
 “OK, little man. Let’s go,” Steve said.   
 We were diplomatic and courteous — this is the part I am most proud of, the way we respected each other after we were no longer legally married. (We had gone ahead with the legal separation; both our lawyers had recommended it. “It’s being smart,” they told me.) We had spared Owen. We had freed him of knowing the pain that is caused when one parent speaks badly of the other. The pain that makes you question the good in yourself. I knew from experience the damage that caused.  
[linespace]  
Owen did not like coming to the small house. I would pick him up at the bus stop three days out of five and take him away from the Court, where he played with his friends, away from the world he knew. It hurt me to recognize the pain I was causing him. The small house didn’t have kids who played outside.   
 “It’s not the same, Mama. Can’t we stay here?”  
 “No Owen. We can’t. You know that Mama lives in the small house now,” I said as I drove away from the suburbs, sucking back my tears. His dissatisfaction continued throughout the months. Even with the newly painted walls, the red tool chest on wheels and the fish that he had for two whole weeks, he never felt at home.   
[linespace]  
In the beginning, being on my own felt like I no longer wore a mask. I was no longer counting the days, praying for a better one, day after day. The air seemed fresher, clearer. I could breathe easier. No disappointing eyes on me. No more judgments. I felt like a whole new chapter was ahead of me and the sky was the limit, fist pumps in the air. There was nothing I couldn’t do. The honeymoon phase of the separation was euphoric. I felt brave. Strong. Independent. No one would hurt me again. I had stood up for myself, my self-respect. As if I had suffered that long in my marriage when being alone was *this* good.   
 I partied like it was 1999 for six whole weeks.   
[linespace]  
“He’s got a project to do this week,” Steve said.  
 “Oh! Things are getting serious in kindergarten,” I said, like I was on The Comedy Network. “I’m on it. What’s it about?”  
 “The family tree,” Steve said, like it was cancer.  
 “Oh. OK,” I said.  
 “Have fun with that,” he said, letting his delight for the timing of this project sink into my skin like black ink as I grabbed Owen’s bag from the back seat.   
 “I’ll see you soon, lil man. Daddy loves you.”  
 “Bye Daddy,” Owen waved.   
 Owen was eating the same and sleeping the same. He seemed to be well adjusted, despite the occasional and quite normal request to stay in the big house when I picked him up. Steve and I were model-separated parents. Gold Star. His teacher even told us that she never would have known about the separation if I hadn’t told her. Owen had shown no signs whatsoever. This was good, right?  
[linespace]  
As the snow continued to cover the ground, I found myself retreating again within my shell. The distance and time apart from the big house and the man that lived there with our only child was starting to creep into my thoughts and invade my days more and more. It didn’t help that I saw his face almost weekly in the local newspapers; photos of him playing sledge hockey, rowing and basketball. I thought for sure I would see him on the cover under the headline: *Sudbury’s Newest Available Bachelor* (his wife is a damn fool edition). And then there was the spread about him winning the City’s Community Builder’s Award. These glimpses of him felt like jagged little slices on the sides of my lungs.  
 “Still a winner, I see,” I said, during another one of our hand-offs.  
 “Sorry?” he asked, narrowing his eyes as he craned his head in my direction, frowning.  
 “So are they giving you the key to the city now, too?”  
 “Oh that. Somebody nominated me,” he said. “OK, bud, Dad will see you soon.”  
 I persisted despite this new source of pain I tried to conceal. His life still seemed full. Without me. He was succeeding and exceeding and moving on. And as much as I wanted to move on, in every way, I wasn’t. I was actually starting to fall apart; like a chain repeatedly slipping off a bicycle. I wasn’t getting anywhere. I just pushed the bike instead. Each passing day brought me closer to the reality that I was no Demi Moore to his Bruce Willis. Not even close. What was worse, underneath all of the anger and resentment, beneath all of the collateral damage, I suspected I still loved him.  
[linespace]  
I wanted to skip Christmas and wake up in 2009. But I realized how selfish that was and decided to make it extra special instead. Owen deserved it. I left his father and I felt I needed to make it up to him. I went out and bought the tallest Christmas tree I could find. It was pre-lit and enormous, standing at 7.5 feet tall. It was ridiculous. I dragged it all the way to my car, twice. The first time I put it up, the lights didn’t work. After yelling at the Gods and crying my eyes out and yelling at the Gods again that they were not going to defeat me, that this was not a sign of things to come, I dismantled the tree and stuffed it back into the box. It didn’t fit. I didn’t care. I found a parking spot at the end of the snow-covered parking lot and dragged the box back into the store. I waited in line with another woman with a similar box at her feet and branches sticking out. It wasn’t just me. I asked the woman wearing a red vest to open the new box with the new tree and watched her plug in the lights. They didn’t work either. Damn you Universe. The very patient and accommodating salesclerk offered to check the warehouse and found one last box. She checked the lights for me once more and then I dragged it out of the store and up the steps to the tiny house. I was going to get this tree up, no matter what.  
 I hung my generic store-bought memory-free decorations on my pre-lit seven-and-a-half-foot mammoth tree. It covered most of the area of the dining room already crammed with a large piano left by the previous owners. I let myself be talked into this bonus-selling feature at the time of purchase. The tree was going to stay and it was going to be beautiful. I finished decorating it and collapsed into bed after midnight.  
[linespace]  
“We’re not spoiling him just because we got separated,” Steve said on the phone. I had called him to discuss the dreaded Christmas Holidays.   
 “I agree. I don’t want to raise a spoiled brat,” I said.  
 “Good.”  
 “Why don’t we keep the gifts simple and still from the both of us, just to make it easier,” I added.  
 “Alright,” Steve said.  
 “So, how are things going at school?” I asked.  
 “Dan, I have to go.”  
 I hung up the phone as the tears stung my eyes. Well, at least we’re still good parents. I was relieved that a broken home didn’t mean broken parenting, even though Steve disliked me so much. We had made a list together and the gifts were still going to be from Santa or from Mom and Dad on the same tag. Solid co-parents. But not friends.  
 I continued to dread the holidays, especially when I saw families, intact. Together at the movies, in restaurants. I wanted that again. I wanted that again with Steve, but I needed to be loved and accepted. I no longer wanted to love a lot and be loved a little. It wasn’t enough But, I was starting to only remember the good times. My therapist said this often happens after a separation. The good times stick; the bad slip away.   
[linespace]  
Steve still couldn’t make eye contact with me when I picked up or he dropped off Owen on weekends. I tried to get in there, to see if he still loved me. His poker face said nothing. He wouldn’t give anything away. As the snow started to accumulate, I realized there was still love rooting through the residue; the way gardens can still come to life after the expiry of summer, fall and winter. My heart would not, could not let him go. I started dreaming of him, of us together again, as a happy family. I would roll over in the morning and feel the cavernous ache in my chest as I stretched out to the other side of the bed.  
[linespace]  
By December 1, the honeymoon phase of my separation was officially over. After waking up with another bad hangover, I rolled over and realized just how miserable I was. My heart was still broken. Independence, schmindependence. I recognized that I was alone with someone I still disliked. Alone with myself and my never-ending-hangover — my hair reeking of smoke and my green skin, my anger, pain and resentment. Alone with my memories and eventually with the-what-ifs? And when I wasn’t in this self-made purgatory, I was picking up my son for my three or four-day quota, feeling like the biggest piece of shit for splitting up our family. I tried to hide my guilt-ridden face and disguise my latest hangover with an exaggerated smile when Owen opened the door to my car. But I knew he saw through that too.  
 I worked long days at the store, getting it ready for Christmas. This was good. I spent each day sorting beads and cutting fabric and making art kits and handmade gifts for the holidays. We had painted the walls in jewel tones of pinks and golds and added two chandeliers. It looked like a very happy place and there was always so much to do, but there were too many days where only a few people came in. The many snowfalls kept shoppers at home and my mind would wander incessantly. I wondered what was Steve doing today? Does he ever think of me? Would he ever forgive me?   
 I didn’t regret leaving. But, I wasn’t prepared for the aftermath. I started seeing Beth, less and drink more, anesthetising my pain rather than talking about it. The many books I planned to read and the pages I planned to write, sat, untouched. Even when I was finally free to feel it all, I didn’t bother. It all seemed like too much work after eating and washing and working all day. Instead, I turned to men. Men I would never have looked at twice, started to seem like viable options. All I wanted was to fill the void. Make me forget. Make it stop.   
 Make me unlove him.  
[linespace]  
I needed to talk to Steve. I needed to know how he was feeling about things and if there ever was a chance for us to get back together. Or at least work towards reconciling. I had seen a photo of him in a local magazine with a date at the Community Builder’s Award Gala, for the award he had won. Her face was cut off, but she was there, wearing a dress and smiling big, beside him. Seeing this image of him with another woman made me realize that if we had any chance to reconcile, it would need to be soon, before someone else fell in love with him. Or worse, before he fell in love with someone else.   
 “Mom, I was wondering if you’d be able to come by tonight, to watch Owen.”  
 “I can be there after supper, around 7 pm? Is it for work?”  
 “No, I really need to talk to Steve.”  
 “Is everything OK?”  
 “Yes. Not really. I just need to know if there’s still a chance.”  
 “He was a good husband in many ways — ”  
 “Mom. Stop. I don’t need to hear this right now.”  
 “I’m just saying that maybe you rushed this. It’s not like he ever hit you.”  
 “I’m not getting into this Mom. Can you be here or not?”  
 “I’ll be there.”  
 “Thank-you.”  
[linespace]  
“Steve, do you mind if I come by tonight?” I asked pacing up the hall, squeezing the phone in my hand.  
 “No Dan. For what?”  
 “I just want to talk.”  
 “It’s not a good idea. You made your decision.”  
 “I’m just asking for fifteen minutes,” my voice cracked.   
 “You’re wasting your time.”  
 The ride there was excruciating. It was dark and snowing. I was already crying and praying to be able to say the right words. I couldn’t help but feel it was now or never. I parked the car and knocked on my old door. He opened it looking tired and sad.  
 “What’s this about?” he asked defensively, slamming the brakes on his chair.  
 I knew by his tone that he was in no mood to talk and that I was truly not welcome.  
 “I was just hoping we could talk. We haven’t really spoken about it all since I left, and I was hoping we could — ”  
 “Talk about what, exactly? If this has anything to do with you wanting to come back, you can forget it. We’re done. You made sure of that when you bought that house.”  
 “Steve, please. I just need you to hear me out,” I said as the tears rolled down my cheeks.  
 “Dan, I mean it. It’s over. I’ve moved on and so should you.”  
 “But — ”  
 “Owen is my number one priority and that’s *all* that matters to me right now. I just want to be a good father. I want you to know that I would never speak badly of you in front of him. But you and I are through. Do you understand me?” he said in his sergeant’s tone.  
 I felt my feet start to sweat in my winter boots. He wouldn’t hear me out. Not even a little. Wouldn’t give me the chance to explain that I didn’t want it to be done. His eyes said it all, even more than the words he spoke. Calm with callous anger and an impenetrable wall of resistance. I could feel it as I stood there and he sat in his metal chair, like a throne. I was but a minion, trying to get close to his robe.   
 I stepped out the door, backwards. Pushed out into the cold.   
 Banished.   
[linespace]  
Several months after he retired, the army sent him a framed *Certificate of Service* in honour of his fourteen years in the military. When I picked it from the post office, the glass was shattered. They hadn’t even bothered to wrap it in bubble wrap, just brown paper over the frame, a final kick in the face for serving his country so loyally. I’d had it re-framed and hung it in his study.  
 I thought about creating a similar framed certificate for serving as a military wife (subordinate) and hanging it above my bed as a reminder to finally look ahead, just like him:   
 *In recognition for time served, suppers made, dreams put on hold, professional and personal development untapped and countless emotional damages (too many to name.) On behalf of the Government of Canada, we thank you for your faithful and devoted service to your husband. Please note, your services are no longer needed or wanted. You are asking for more than he is willing (and able) to give. There is no compromising in the Canadian Armed Forces. (You should have moved on, like he told you to.) Your contract is now terminated. Pro Patria*[linespace]My mom was peeking through the blind as I drove up the driveway. When she opened the door, I collapsed into her arms, crying like a baby.   
 “We’re done mom,” I wailed. “He wants nothing to do with me. Told me to move on.”  
 She held me while I sobbed. She knew she understood this pain. My father had said the same to her.  
[linespace]  
My drinking was already out of hand. I would drink a whole bottle of wine, getting smashed before I left the house for a night of partying. My costume for the world I still did not fit in; a full-bodied, elegant blackcurrant fruit with a hint of spice and cedar and a dose of courage. The nights when Owen was with Steve, I spent around other drunk people. I found another forlorn friend, recently separated and also a teacher. Together we managed to forget our troubles, at least for a few hours every night.  
 As I stood at the bar, waiting to order another drink, I saw a young man in a wheelchair wiz by. My body seized and my eyes followed him as he stopped to meet his friends putting the breaks on his chair. I left the bar and hurried outside. Being so blitzed, I usually ended up in the smoking section bumming a cigarette off of someone I knew, or didn’t know. This night was no exception. As I was lighting one, trying to shield it from the cold wind, I noticed a familiar hue of green to my right. I moved in closer to make sure.  
 “Hey, what are you doing wearing that?” I asked putting my hand on some guy’s shoulder. He was wearing a standard military-issued combat-jacket with a black toque and torn jeans. The same jacket Steve wore to work everyday. As if this boy had snatched it from our closet.  
 “What’s your fuckin problem?” he said.  
 “Where did you get that? You can’t wear that here.”  
 “I can wear this anywhere, bitch. Free country and shit.”  
 “It’s not *free,* asshole. People die wearing that jacket and you’re disgracing it in a *bar*?”  
 “Let em die! Fuck the army. Fuck them all,” he said pointing into the dark sky.  
 I leapt in toward him, like a leopard about to swallow its prey in one gulp. I wanted to stop his mouth from spewing another word. Triggered like a pit-bull by a green jacket with a maple leaf on its side.  
 “Danielle, Danielle, leave that guy alone.” My friend said, pulling on my arm.  
 “He’s nuts. Seriously, that guy is skitzo, drug-induced-schizophrenia. Don’t mess with him.”  
 I spiralled out of the smoking crowd and away from the bar. I walked home alone. In the dark. In the cold. Knowing that I would never fit in anywhere. I lived on the fringes of two worlds. One civilian. One military. One single. And one still married to a man that didn’t love me enough.   
 On my way home, as I panted through the scarf wrapped around my face, into the bitter night, I thought about how impervious Steve had been when I dropped by, to talk. I thought about his body language and the colossal wall he had erected to protect himself. Impermeable. This recent memory brought me back to a distant memory; one he had shared with me a few years into our marriage, about his mother.   
 She had had him at 17 and for the first five years of Steve’s life, she threatened to give him away. She locked him outside their apartment building, tying him to the entrance staircase with a rope. She terrified him with threats of abandonment if he wouldn’t stop crying or misbehaving, like children do. There were many reasons why she was unable to cope, raising a brown boy as a white mother, in a northern mining town in the 70’s. But I know these threats had marked him.   
 “What kind of mother says that to her child? He said to me, so many years ago. “We’ve never been close. I think that’s why I can only love so much,” he had told me.   
 I really believed I could break through this barrier, caused by his mother. Maybe that’s why he said he’d never leave the army. The army was the only family where he felt secure. The only family that would never abandon him — no man left behind.  
 But in the end, they did, too.  
 In my inebriated state of brokenness, I understood why Steve was so angry with me. I did the one thing his mother warned she would do. The one thing he thought the army would never do.   
 I had left him.  
[linespace]   
Christmas Eve arrived three weeks later. I went to the big house as a guest. Steve’s parents, brother and wife were already there with their kids. I walked in as they were opening their gifts. I felt like an alien. I wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. It was awkward for them and for me. But everyone did their best to act cordial. Steve had agreed to let me sleep there so we could both wake up with our son on Christmas day.   
 “Don’t think this will happen every Christmas,” he said.  
 His family did not stay long after the gifts were unwrapped. Decent pleasantries were exchanged and they closed the door behind them.  
 After bathing Owen and getting him ready for bed, I prepared my own bed on the couch and left the Christmas lights on. I had put up the tree a few weeks before because I felt I had to. I also wanted to. I didn’t want them to go without a tree. I cried as I lay on my old couch, like a stranger, thinking of the family I had torn apart when all I wanted to do was fix our lives. I missed my family. I tried to get comfortable as I stared at the shelves that used to hold my books. They looked so naked. I gave up trying to sleep and knocked on Steve’s door and let myself in. I offered my body and he took it. But he wanted nothing else.  
[linespace]  
The next morning we were Gold Star parents again. Sucking it up for Owen and celebrating Santa’s visit. We unwrapped the gifts and opened the boxes. I had gotten Steve a little something, an ornament that meant *courage* in Mandarin. I thought it was perfect; small but thoughtful, having been to Beijing the summer before. I also bought him Barack Obama’s biography. He was touched by the gifts, I could tell. He gave me some Christmas scented soaps from Yves St-Laurent. The scent made me nauseous, pine trees and cinnamon. At least it was something, I thought to myself. (Later I found out the soaps were a free gift for so many dollars spent.)  
 We opened our presents, Owen and I got ready to go my Mémère’s. It was a tradition we had followed my whole life. It was strange to go without Steve.  
 “Um, do you want to come, to my grandmother’s place?”  
 “Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’m just going to stay and play video games. Ty and Mel should be coming back at some point today.”  
 “OK,” I said, disappointed.  
 “Listen, nothing’s changed,” he said looking directly into my eyes, while Owen went to use the bathroom before putting his winter gear on.  
 “Oh. OK.,” I responded, leaning into the door.  
 [linespace]  
Steve came to pick up Owen on December 27 at the small house. I loaded his truck up with all the toys that my family gave our son. I kept the smaller things in the tiny house and the larger ones were sent to the bigger house. No wonder he never liked the small house.  
 Steve had Owen until New Year’s Day. I had no plans for New Year’s Eve. And, after I sent my son with his father and his big toys, I started my huge descent to the bottom. The rock bottom.   
 The drinking was getting old. The bar hopping was done. The red wine was no longer deadening the pain, even temporarily. I lay on the couch for five days and five nights. I watched TV and slept. Ate chocolate and called no one. Except Steve. I called him New Year’s Eve around 6pm. Crying. Sick of myself and so god-damned lonely, I just couldn’t stand it anymore.  
 “Hey.”  
 “What’s wrong,” he asked right away.   
 “I, I ah, just needed to call you. It’s hard you know.”  
 “OK,” he said sounding compassionate for the first time since I moved out. “What’s going on Dan? What’s wrong?”  
 “Nothing. Everything. I’m just so sad you know. It’s just the time of year and with everything else…” I cried into the phone.  
 “What are you doing tonight?” he asked.  
 “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just want to stay home.”  
 “Why don’t you call your friend Melanie or Julie? Please call them,” he said.  
 “Ya. I just don’t know what to do any more you know? My heart just can’t take any more pain.”  
 “I’m worried about you,” he said.  
 “I just don’t know where to put all this pain.”  
 “I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said. “But please call one of your friends or your mom tonight.”  
 I hung up the phone and emptied my debilitated heart, scraping the very bottom of everything that had happened in the last year. I woke up on the couch at 10 pm and continued to watch the New York City New Year celebrations on TV. I fell asleep before the ball dropped.  
 I woke up the next morning to the sound of knocking at the door. It was my mom and she looked clearly worried.  
 “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for two days.”  
 “My cell is dead and I can’t find the cordless.”  
 She was surprised by the mess. I usually kept the small house so tidy. Instead, empty chocolate and chips bags littered the floor and tabletop. Empty bottles of wine.  
 “You should go take a shower. I’ll clean up in here,” she said.  
 “I don’t know what to do, Mom. Where do I go from here? All I ever wanted was his love,” I said leaving my hand against my heart. “That’s *all* I ever wanted.”  
 “I know sweetheart. I know. Go take a shower and we’ll go from there.”  
[linespace]   
I took the longest and hottest shower I remember ever taking.   
 I washed off all of 2008.

Anticipation of Homecoming

*Common Reactions:   
  
 Increased energy and activity, sleep and appetite disturbances, feelings of joy, excitement, anxiety, apprehension, and restlessness. Impatience.*

It was my fifth day in a row on the treadmill. The dark winter morning still hung as I thumped against the hard rubber belt, ear-buds bellowing music in my ears while other early-risers ran beside me. The YMCA was just a ten-minute drive from my house and I had finally made a promise to myself to get healthy again. For me.   
 On January 2, I committed to a 5K, a local race taking place in May. I ran and pushed through each difficult stride, and even though I was running on place, I was getting somewhere. I was moving farther away from the person I once was and closer to the one I wanted to be. It wasn’t easy getting up in the dark, in -30 C weather and putting on my running shoes. But I did. There were no other distractions while I ran on the treadmill but my own thoughts. I shed more than pounds while I trained for the run.   
 Under the pummelling of my feet, I could feel the anger thinning.  
 [linespace]  
Turning the page to a new year on the calendar made me want to start anew. I wanted to treat my body with kindness, on all levels. It had carried me so far, even with all of the pain and torment, and I was still standing. It was time for change.  
 My drinking days were far and few. It was more than trying to run with a hangover and no longer being in my twenties. I was determined to face the pain head on and to work through it, for good. I was determined to care for myself, the way I had cared for everyone else, for years. The nights without Owen used to hum with the sound of the TV. But it only filled my little house with hollow echoes. I turned it off and started reading again. I surrounded myself with books and stories and read them cover to cover instead of empting bottles of wine. I lost myself in the worlds of others and began to see myself within their splintered lives. I roamed bookstores and libraries. I wanted to touch them, inhale them, stitch words to the inside of my skin. I slept with books by my side, rolling over them in the night. Books were the first things I touched every morning. I would not leave the house without one or two in my bag.   
 The voracious reading brought back my appetite for the written word and the stories that made me feel like I wasn’t alone. I read memoirs like *The Glass Castle* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and I reread *Reading Lolita in Tehran.* I began to think about my own writing again, how I was encouraged by a professor in my ‘Women in Religion’ class in my third year of University: *You might consider writing for a living* she wrote in red pen at the bottom of my paper, a true story I had shared about my childhood. My broken bits. *It could be healing for you and for others who read it,* she added*.* Her words, even then, were marks I was tallying on my scale, the one trying to tip me away from the damage done. I carried this paper in my bag for months with the red *A* slashed across the top right corner and her tiny words scribbled at the bottom. I thought about the stories I had already written, a few years before; about our life in the military and especially the one about the day that changed everything. I wanted to write again, to put my pen on paper and let the words take me where I know I needed to go. The nudge to write soon became more of a shove — a call to action. It would sporadically wake me in the middle of the night, summoning me to get the stories out. I moved a small table into the corner of my bedroom and started writing by hand in a large journal.   
 Every time I sat, the words poured.  
[linespace]  
Thoughts of Steve wrapped around me daily. I tried to push them away, but a deep knowing continued to haunt me — no one else on the planet could ever know or understand what we had endured together, what we had overcome, even though on the outside it might look as though we had failed. We were the only two witnesses. I began asking myself the big questions in life. Why had this happened? To him? To me? Was there a bigger reason for it all? I needed to make sense of what had happened to us: the paralysis and the breakdown of our marriage. I wanted answers.   
 I enrolled in a group meditation class, adding to my list of self-care activities: running, reading and writing. My cousin, who was also my business partner, was fundamentally changed after six weeks, so I took it up too. It was a meditation class intended to clear emotional and spiritual blockages to help you move forward in your life. I was nervous at first. I knew I’d have to be present, and I wouldn’t have any wine or books to shield me from what would surface. The class was two days a week, on Tuesday nights and Sunday afternoons.   
 I was the first student to arrive. I chose my seat to the left of the room by the heavy-curtained window. Several women soon followed, each different from the one before. They were young and old, from their early twenties to their early seventies. They looked like every day women except for a couple of them who wore headbands and rings on every finger. They seemed to want to show their commitment to the spiritual world by the way they dressed: Goddess necklaces and moon rings. We sat in chairs in a circle, inside a small and dark room in the West End of downtown—all of us there wanting to move on from something. I counted ten women, including the facilitator named Shelley, a small woman with long red hair.  
 “Hello dear ones, I’m so happy you have gathered here today and committed to this experience together. I have taught this specific class several times now and I’m amazed at the changes that take place.”  
 “I’m ready,” said a woman sitting to my left, with a deep scratchy voice, “I don’t want to carry this crap around anymore.”  
 “Well, you’re in the right place,” Shelley said as I shifted my feet under my chair. “Let’s get started, shall we? Let’s close our eyes and take three deep breaths in and out.”  
 After breathing in and out just three times I could feel my head already spin, my breaths had been so quick and short that I wasn’t used to so much oxygen rushing up to my brain. I let myself be carried by her words as she brought us deep inside our bodies. We travelled into ourselves, passed our blood and our bones, and into the place far beyond. Into the stillness.  
 “Now that we have arrived at this deep place, I want you to scan your bodies from the very top of your heads to the tip of your toes. I want you to skim over every part, feeling for any uneasiness or heaviness. If you do feel a block, I want you to wash it away with a warm white light. Infuse it with your healing glow until you feel it is no longer a shadow.”  
 After the first night, I could barely drive home. My body was so tired and unaccustomed to being is such a state of tranquility. I climbed into bed and fell into a deep sleep. We were encouraged to continue our light work during the week and make notes of any changes we were experiencing, good or bad. I looked forward to the second session. During the third, I reached the dead centre of my pain, going deeper and deeper, like opening one babushka doll after another, until I reached the pea-sized doll that held the magnitude of my wreckage — the cavernous space where I stored my deepest sorrow. I sat in group-meditation with the burden of my broken heart, gaping and wounded with a room of nine other women. I wept uncontrollably, tears pouring down my face.  
 “Oh Sweetie, I know this isn’t easy. But you’re safe here and you’re not alone. We’re all here sending you love as you repair your vessel,” Shelley said.  
 I couldn’t stop crying. There was no more sucking it up. No more pretending behind the booze, the faux-smiles, the lies I wore as I bought our milk and bread. At last, I sat in silence, refusing to run from what wanted to erupt — the deep and painful purging. The years of muck I had been carrying around like sandbags attached to my body. All of the grief I couldn’t access when I was living with Steve and not permitted to take the time I needed to repair all of the brokenness; the grief that alcohol could not heal or even help me access long enough to mend it when I was finally on my own. After completing the third week of group meditation, I abandoned work in the middle of the day because the tears would not stop. It was a Friday afternoon and my cousin and I worked in the shop together on Fridays. We called it Fun-Fridays where both our sewing machines would buzz as we worked to fill the shelves with aprons, tea cozies and pencil cases.   
 “Danielle, what’s wrong?” Julie asked.   
 “I just can’t stop. It’s like a tap that won’t turn off,” I said wiping my face with the polka-dotted scrap fabric sitting on the table.  
 “I know. That class does something to you. It brings you to the source. It’s a wild trip.” I nodded. “Just go home. This is not Fun-Friday for you. Go home and let it all out. Don’t even think of this place.”  
 For two whole days I wept. I wept until there wasn’t a drop of fluid left in me.  
 Week after week, I continued to expel the bitterness and resentment I had accumulated against Steve and the rest of the world. And myself.   
 After the resentment, a surprising forgiveness. A new understanding.  
 I completed the six-week course feeling as though I had been overhauled. I could see the good in Steve again. He was a loving father, a loyal man. Trustworthy. He had more determination and resilience than anyone I had ever met. I remembered the kind things he once did for me. How he stuck sweet notes to a dozen surfaces when I got back from the hospital after having Owen. *You are strong and beautiful* was pasted to the mirror in the bathroom, *for your pain my love*, was on the Extra Strength Advil bottle, *you’ll feel better soon*, was glued to my bag of sanitary pads, under the sink.   
 We loved each other fiercely once.   
[linespace]

The space and the time to grieve, and the ability to go inside my ruined heart allowed me to finally start to heal, more than I ever did during my one-hour sessions with my counsellor Beth. With her, I could barely scratch the surface before I’d have to bottle it up again and return home, wearing my grief as a wall, separating myself from Steve and the world. I now allowed myself to hear the memories of his hurtful words that surfaced as I ran on the treadmill. I could sit inside the many losses that arose while I read late into the night. I permitted the physical pain inside my body to bleed through my breathing space and stain the white paper of my journals as I wrote longhand at my table. I no longer walked the streets with a clenched jaw, or combed the bars with a devastated heart. I didn’t even hide the tears from Owen anymore.  
 “What’s wrong Mama?” he’d ask as we played with play-dough in the living room.   
 “I just feel sad Owen,” I said, as he looked at me, uneasy. “And sometimes, when you’re sad, you cry.”  
 He hugged me tightly with his small arms around my neck, his head pressed against my chest.  
 I began to see myself as doing the best I could as a human, flawed and still worthy of love. I began to think of Steve as a boy, unloved by his mother, an imperfect man, also doing his best in extremely arduous circumstances. After two months of consistent meditation, running, reading and writing, space and time to let out all of the crap that needed to come out for years. I uncovered a clear vision. I still loved this man.   
[linespace]  
I gave up my acts of desperation. I no longer called Steve, trying to get him to talk about the future. I didn’t try to see what his eyes alone could tell me during our hand-offs. I focused on myself. Meditation and exercise grounded me, cultivated a new self-worth. I started to feel better in my clothes and in my skin. My writing gave me purpose and helped me create meaning from the pain.   
 In stepping back, I made room for him to step forward.   
 It was early March and the snow was melting quickly. Owen and I waited outside the small house for Steve to arrive. We splashed through the puddles as Steve pulled up towards us. He was wearing his sunglasses but pushed them up on top of his head as we approached his truck.  
 “Beautiful sunny day,” he said, his bare arm hanging out the window.  
 “It sure is, especially when you get to jump in puddles,” I said letting myself dance with Owen one last time, holding his hands.  
 Steve smiled, looking at us.  
 “Thanks for helping Owen with that family-tree project,” he said. “He got it back last week. I guess they hung it in his class for a while.”  
 “Oh. No worries. We had fun cutting and gluing,” I said, blowing my bangs out of my face.  
 “It looked great,” he said. “You’ve always been good at that kind of thing, making it special, I mean.”  
 “Thanks,” I said, my cheeks flushing.  
 “I’ll see you in a few days,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.  
 “Yes,” I said as I waved good-bye to them both.  
[linespace]  
The following weekend, I planned on getting an early start on some spring-cleaning. I called Steve to ask him a favour.  
 “Hey, what are you doing today?” I said.  
 “Not much, I have a paper due Monday,” he said.  
 “Do you think I could use the garage to clean my car?”  
 “Ah, sure. I’ll move mine out. Just so you know, Owen’s at a birthday party for the afternoon.”  
 “OK, thanks. I’ll be there in an hour.”  
 I drove into the garage and started right away. Steve had lined up all the cleaning supplies on the small table with a few rags and a bucket. His garage was meticulous, as always. It made me grin to see everything so neat and organized.  
 As I was washing the inside of my car, he came into the garage.  
 “How’s it going?” he asked.  
 “Good. Just finishing the inside now.”  
 “You missed a spot,” he joked.  
 “Funny one,” I said remembering how unfunny his jokes always were, even though he always tried to convince me otherwise. “I’m sure it’s not up to your standards, but it’s a definite improvement.”  
 “It looks good,” he said. “So, I was just about to make some lunch, did you want to come in?”  
 “Ya. Sure. That would be great.”  
 We ate our scrambled eggs and toast, sitting across from each other at the small table he used to prepare food. Our knees were almost touching.  
 “So what’s new these days?” he said.  
 “Well, lots actually,” I said.  
 He smiled curiously.  
 “I signed up for the 5K happening in May.”  
 “Wow. Good for you.”  
 “Ya, it has been. I’ve been going to the Y like four days a week and I’m really enjoying it, surprisingly.”  
 “You seem different,” he said.  
 “Different how?” I asked.  
 “I don’t know. Less angry, happy, even.”  
 “I am.”  
 “I’ve joined a meditation group and I’m writing again.”  
 “You are, you did?”  
 “Ya. I’ve been clearing a lot of junk.  
 He looked at me with a bemused look on his face.  
 “I know you don’t really believe in all that New Age stuff, but, it’s really working for me.”  
 “Well whatever it is, it’s nice to see.”  
 We continued to eat our lunch in silence. The radio was on, playing CBC in the background.   
 “Steve, do you think we’d be able to maybe go out for supper one night, like on a date?”  
 “I don’t know Dan,” he said as he pushed the egg on his plate. I held my breath and watched his hands. “Well, I guess we could.”  
 “Alright then,” I said beaming, now looking at his face.  
 “I can’t promise you anything.”  
 “I know, I know, just dinner.”   
 “OK. Dinner. I’ll call you,” he said.  
 I continued to eat my scrambled eggs, even while my exhilaration buzzed right down to my toes.  
[linespace]  
Steve called two nights later.  
 “Hey, it’s me.”  
 “Everything OK with Owen?”  
 “Ya. Everything’s fine. So, I was wondering if you still wanted to do dinner?”  
 “Of course,” I said dancing on the spot.  
 “Alright, how’s Friday at 7pm. I’ll make reservation at Verdichios.”  
 “Sounds perfect,” I said.  
 “OK, then, we have a date,” he said.  
 “Yes we do,” I almost screeched before hanging up the phone.  
 I ran to my room and jumped on my bed, falling back on the pillows, imagining all kinds of romantic scenarios with a man I had known fifteen years. I darted to my closet and started raking through the choices. Not feeling like any of these outfits were viable picks for our first date, I grabbed my keys and headed to the mall.  
[linespace]  
I called my mom to tell her about our date.  
 “I’ll babysit. I can take Owen to the island, that way it gives you guys more time.”  
 “It’s just dinner mom.”  
 “I know. But it’s a start. I’m so happy for you Dan. For you and Steve and Owen.”  
 “Me too Mom, but I need to know that he’s changed, too. There’s no way I can go back if he’s still the same.”  
 “I know. Just have a good time. I’ll be praying for the most benevolent outcome.”  
 “That’s allowed,” I laughed.

[linespace]  
We dated four years before we married, but it was a long-distance relationship. I lived in residence at the University of Ottawa and he lived in the barracks in Petawawa. He visited me most weekends. We drank lots of beer and had lots of sex in those days, but there was no courtship; no dates where the boy picks up the girl in his truck and drops her off, and kisses her goodnight.   
 This was different. Special. I was going on a *real* date with my husband. (My ex-husband.) I wanted to look perfect. He was taking me to the most expensive restaurant in the city and I had never been there before.   
 I must have checked my makeup and hair a dozen times while I was pacing up and down the narrow hall of my small house. My hair was straightened, just touching my shoulders, my lips glossy and my black pants and sheer black blouse with just enough showing, all carefully put together. I finished it off with my tall black boots. I peered out the window looking for his silver truck to appear. I did some deep breathing exercises and then tried to shake out the nerves. I knew I had a tendency to get my hopes up and I tried to ratchet down my expectations. We would both have to want this, equally. There was no going backwards. Not after all this.  
 Turning the corner and driving ever so cautiously, he made his way up my long street. I took another deep breath and turned off the music and lights, and quickly made my way down the steps. I smiled as he pulled up towards me. He looked good. He always looked good. He was wearing a blue button-down shirt under his navy blue bomber leather jacket and he smelled amazing; strong and sweet all at once. His hair was shorter than the last time I had seen him.   
 “Hello there,” I said as I used the side step to hike into the passenger seat.  
 “Hi,” he said, letting a smile span his face, but quickly curling in his lips. I sat in his truck like I had done hundreds of times before. But this time, I sat up straight with my legs and heels together, trying to make polite conversation without letting my nerves get the better of me.  
 “I spoke to Owen tonight. It sounds like he’s having a good time with his cousins,” I said.  
 “Well that’s good. He loves spending time with them,” he said.  
 “He does,” I said tapping the side of my leg. “So, what did you do today?”   
 “Studied, played video games.”  
 “Sounds like a good balance,” I said with a giggle.  
 “It’s not the kind of video games I want Owen to see. I only play them when he’s gone.”  
 “I appreciate that.”  
 “What about you?”   
 I looked around his truck and realized he had probably cleaned it again, just for tonight. It was immaculate and it even had the new car smell, even through his truck was now four years old. I couldn’t help but feel this was a good sign.  
 “So?”  
 “Oh sorry,” I giggled. “I went for my workout at the Y this morning and then I just stayed home and cleaned and read. Typical Saturday off these days.”  
 “Are you still writing?”   
 “Yes, actually; more so in the last month. I also joined a writer’s group.  
 “Sounds serious,” he said. “You’ve been wanting to write for as long as I’ve known you.”  
 “You’re right, I have.”  
 As we pulled up to the restaurant, we both searched the entrance for the wheelchair parking. There it is I thought, but didn’t say it out loud. Steve had disassembled his chair to fit it in the back seat. The weather was freezing cold.   
 “Just give me a minute to put the chair together,” he said. “You can wait inside.”   
 “No, that’s OK.,” I said as my knees knocked and my teeth chattered, watching him assemble his chair and transfer into it.  
 Inside, the waiters helped seat us at our table and lit the candle.   
 “This is fancy,” I said.  
 “Yes, and the food is good, too,” he said. “I came here a couple of months ago with Trish and Gordon when they were up from Edmonton.” His childhood friend and wife.  
 We both ordered a glass of wine. This is it, I thought.   
 The small talk continued for a while; we spoke about Owen and his school, the store, our dog Molly and Steve’s classes at the College.  
 “You look very pretty,” he said as we waited for our main course to arrive.  
 “Thanks,” I said, trying not to let the flush on my cheeks surface through the dimly lit room.  
 “I’m really glad to see you doing so well, with the running and the writing and everything. I get the feeling that you’re in a much better place now.”  
 “I am, Steve. What about you?” I said pressing my feet into the floor. “Do you feel you’ve changed in the last five months?”  
 “Trying to make the most of it,” he said. “Staying positive for the young fella, but, I admit, it hasn’t been easy.”   
 He looked at me and held my gaze, and in that moment I knew he still loved me. It was the first time he had shown me any vulnerability. He was going to let me in.   
 “It’s been lonely, Dan. Really lonely, but it’s also given me time to think. About everything.”  
 Our server arrived with our main courses, with the worst timing ever; steak and potatoes with roasted vegetables for me and oven-roasted chicken with seafood for him.   
 The coffee eventually came and we still had not got back to the conversation we started before dinner. Instead, I felt him pulling back as he cleared his throat and played with the cuff on his shirt. He scratched the top of his head as he often did, and in that moment I just wanted to disclose how much I still loved him and how I still believed more than ever that we were meant for each other. But I didn’t.  
 “This is really nice,” I said, adding milk and sugar to my coffee.  
 “Yes, it is,” he answered looking at me like he was deliberating his options.  
 I could still feel his shield, despite his willingness to have dinner together.  
 “Steve, do you think, you could, um, ever want to try and make this work again?”  
 “I don’t know. I’m really not ready to go there. But, this is a good start, don’t you think?”  
 “Of course,” I said, shuffling my feet under the table. “I never even expected us to be sitting here like this, at dinner.”  
 “Me either,” he said with a laugh.  
 “It’s just, I’ve been hoping that we could work at this, together. You know, give it one more try. I’m not asking to move back in.”  
 “Let’s not ruin a good night, Okay? You know I’m not the kind of person to make any rash decisions. Especially now. Not when Owen is involved.”  
 “We’re on the same page when it comes to Owen,” I said.  
 He put another sugar in his coffee. I moved my chair as close to the table as I could and went for it.  
 “Do you feel like we both needed this break? I mean, despite the fact that I was the one to walk away?”  
 “I’ll admit it, Dan. Things couldn’t have kept going the way they were. It would have gotten ugly. It was getting ugly. It’s just,” he said, avoiding my eyes, “I never thought you’d really ever leave. But you did,” he said now locking my eyes to his; showing me his pain, sorrow.  
 “I did leave, Steve, and I can never take that back. But I had to. I felt like I was just a dark mark in your otherwise golden agenda.”  
 He was still leaning forward, elbows on the table.  
 “I needed you, too. I was hurting and I wasn’t able to tell you how much. You wanted to bury it and keep it all in the past. But I couldn’t live like that anymore. It was killing me.”  
 “Well, I guess it’s just the way you did it. Buying a house. It was all so much and so fast after Beijing, and right before a new school year.”  
 “I’ll agree that it did happen fast after Beijing, but you and I both know this was brewing long before that. Before the accident even. And you always had something going on. There never would have been a good time.”  
 He was still listening. Still engaged. I kept going.  
 “I just couldn’t go one more day,” I said, almost breathless now.  
 “I know Dan, I’ve had a lot of time to think about it.”  
 “And?” I asked, my hands now squeezing my cup of coffee.  
 “I know I was selfish — that I only cared about my goals. I know I never put you first or our marriage, and I’m sorry for that.”  
 My eyes started to well up with tears, but I held them back.   
 “It wasn’t fair, the way I treated you. You were always there for me, through it all; the tours, the accident, rehab. I know you loved me. Nobody else could understand where I’ve been and where I am now. We’ve been through it all together,” he said. “But, I also know that you hurt me when you left. More than you will ever know. It will take time for me to let you in again.”  
 “I understand,” I said. “I never wanted to hurt you. I just didn’t know what else to do.”  
 “I know that now.”  
 “Steve — ”   
 “I took you for granted. Distance has a way of helping you see things.”  
 “It wasn’t just you,” I said. “I now understand why you had to move forward and keep filling your days. I know you did what you had to, to survive this. We’re just so different and we deal with shit in our own ways. I think we both did the best we could, even though we both really hurt each other.”  
 “I’m just asking you to be patient with me,” he said.  
 “I can do that,” I said. “I can totally do that.”  
 “I still love you,” he said as he reached over and grabbed my hand.  
 “I love you too. I’ve always loved you,” I said, my lips quivering, tears now filling my eyes.  
 “So we’ll take it slow,” he said.  
 “Slow,” I said, squeezing his hand.  
[linespace]  
He pulled into the driveway. Snow was tumbling against the windshield. He put the truck into park.  
 “I’m really happy we did this,” I said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect tonight.”  
 “I feel the same way,” he said, reaching for my hand. My head a little dizzy from the wine and my stomach buzzing with anticipation.  
 “It was more than what I had imagined. But I do tend to keep my hopes in check,” he said.  
 “Yes, we’re opposites in that way,” I smiled, cautiously.  
 And then, he leaned in, and kissed me. His full lips touching mine, soft and gentle, like it was our first kiss. Like no time had passed between us. Like the past, present and future were happening all at once.   
 “I’ve missed that,” he said.  
 His kiss was the only one that ever mattered.  
[linespace]  
We agreed to take it slow, but before too long we were talking on the phone every day. We went on a couple of movie dates and coffee dates, just the two of us. Then, I started to come by for dinner and movie nights — the three of us together. I always traveled back to my little house to sleep. We continued to talk about our expectations, our fears and our hopes for the future. We talked about almost everything.  
 After tucking Owen into bed one night and giving him all of the time he wanted to share his stories which he did to prolong his going to bed, I headed back to the couch and cuddled up against Steve.  
 “All tucked in?” he said.  
 “Like a bug in a rug,” I said.  
 “He’s happy,” he said.  
 “I know,” I said.  
 “So, there is something I’ve been wanting to talk about,” I said.  
 “Sounds grim,” he said.  
 “It is. Kind of. In the spirit of keeping it real, how are we going to deal with what happened or might have happened while we were separated?”  
 “You mean if we dated and — ”  
 “Ya. That. Do you think we should disclose that part if we’re to make this work, in the long run?”  
 “I don’t see it helping anything,” he said. “We were separated. I’d rather not know. You?”  
 “I don’t think I want to know either. Too much of a slippery slope.”  
 “I’m OK if you’re OK,” he said.  
 “I’m OK if you’re OK,” I said.  
 “Then, it’s settled. Don’t ask don’t tell,” he joked. We’ll never discuss it.”  
 “It’s sealed,” I said.  
[linespace]  
I felt like a teenager again with butterflies in my stomach, counting the hours until I saw him while I tried to busy myself at work. He would text me messages throughout my workday. I miss you. Are you coming over tonight? Thinking of you. I had a permanent grin on my face and felt like I was floating instead of walking. We had fallen in love with each other again. I was dating my husband and he was dating me. I now spent very little time at the small house. We snuggled on the couch with our hands on each other while we watched whatever was on TV.  
 “So, I was thinking that, maybe you should move back in,” he said with his head still facing the TV, letting a huge smile cross his face.  
 “Seriously?”  
 “A hundred percent,” he said, putting his lips on mine.  
[linespace]  
As I packed up the boxes again, I couldn’t believe that I was cheerfully going back to the suburbs. I was so eager to leave it all behind, I never thought I would ever be raring live there, and with the man I had left so definitely just five months before.   
 I rummaged through the boxes and found our wedding photos, the ones that stayed hidden in my basement. I sat on the floor and examined our faces, our genuine happiness. I traced the outline of our bodies with my finger and wiped my tears one last time. I carefully wrapped them back up and sealed the package with tape.   
[linespace]  
Six weeks after our dinner date, I steered the U-Haul back to the Court with my books and other belongings. And, one month after that, we renewed our wedding vows — just the three of us, in our home. While the sun was setting, and the buds were sprouting in our single maple tree, around a candle in our living room, we held hands as we recited the vows we had written ourselves. Our son stood as our only witness.   
 Owen then handed Steve the ring that had been hidden in his pocket, a diamond anniversary band. Steve held my eyes as he slipped it on my finger, candlelight dancing across the faces of my husband and son.

The Private

The day we met I was 19 he was almost 20. We were both home for Easter weekend. He was on leave from the army and I was on break from University, both out with friends we hadn’t seen for a long time. The bar was packed but I noticed him right away. He stood out from the crowd; long legs, beautiful brown skin and warm brown eyes. He was smiling, no, laughing with his friends. They were all much shorter than he was, which made him seem even taller, like a giant. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt but I could tell he was muscular. Strong. I looked at him and he caught me peeking. I smiled and made eye contact, my brown eyes on his, but only for a microsecond, even so, long enough for him to notice I was interested.   
 “I think I’m going to ask that guy to dance,” I said to my friend, biting down on my lip, trying to hide my exhilaration.   
 “Really? I dare you,” she said.   
 She didn’t have to. I knew I’d do it. Something inside me told me so. Insisted.  
 After another drink, I searched for him in the crowded bar. I found him and his friends; they had moved closer to the dance floor. My heart thumped as I strolled towards him. He was wide-eyed, listening to his friend tell a story, probably about a girl he had met the weekend before. He smiled at me as he watched me moving in closer to him — liquid courage pulsing through my veins. I beamed back and kept moving forward, his brilliant smile, his hair short on the sides with a flat top, carefully groomed.   
 “Do you want to dance?” I asked not even introducing myself.   
 He grinned, making his cheeks puff out like two little apples. “Sure,” he said, as he looked at me, then at his friends. I could tell they had a bet to see how long it would take before one of them picked up. “Lead the way,” he said.   
 I grabbed his hand, folded it inside mine and felt a sudden quiver pulsate inside my stomach, followed by a swift knowing that his hand was meant to be mine.   
 We made our way through the crowd of people holding their drinks and swaying their bodies to the music. We danced to a fast song and then a slow one and then two more. He didn’t let me go. He brought me in close, my heart beating against his; my arms draped around his neck and his encircled around my waist; our bodies warm against each other, in sync. We shared sound bites of information as the music vibrated. He served in the Army, the infantry: a private. I went to school, university: Women’s Studies. He thanked me for the dance, lingered a little after the slow songs came to a stop. We exchanged first names. But that was all. It was time for me to go.   
 “Maybe I’ll see you around,” he said, his eyes catching the light.   
 “Maybe,” I answered, stepping away from the dance floor.   
 “If it’s meant to be,” I added, turning my head, making sure he would hear me.  
 I thought about him every day, annoyed with myself for not getting his last name or his number. I wanted to know more about this guy who was from the North like me, but no longer lived at home. Why hadn’t I ever seen him before?   
 Two weeks later, back at University, my roommate begged me to go out to her favorite bar. I refused at first, and then finally I said yes. It was the end of my first year and I was growing tired of the same scene. That was the night she told me to turn around.   
 “Check him out,” she said, her mouth loose and open, awestruck by what stood behind me. I spun around and saw him, overcome by his presence, confidence. Standing there before me, 500 km away from the place where we first met. Even more handsome then I had remembered. He strutted towards me, grinning from ear to ear, as if he’d been hoping to find me, too.   
 “Do you want to dance?” he asked, reaching for my hand.   
 “Lead the way,” I said, feeling the flutters in my stomach.  
 “I guess it *was* meant to be,” he whispered.  
 “Yes,” I said.