

**An Interview with Brooke
King, author of WAR FLOWER:
MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ**

A hand-drawn illustration on a textured, light-colored background. In the center, a skull is depicted with a crossbones symbol on its forehead. A rifle is positioned vertically behind the skull, with its barrel pointing upwards. The skull and rifle are rendered in dark green and black. Below the skull, a large, multi-petaled flower is drawn in shades of yellow, green, and blue. The background features a red wash behind the skull and rifle, and some dark, scribbled lines in the upper left corner.

WARFLOWER

MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ

BROOKE KING

Andria Williams: Brooke, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with Wrath-Bearing Tree. We are all excited to feature an excerpt from your debut memoir, [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#). In a starred review, Kirkus called it “an absolutely compelling war memoir marked by the author’s incredible strength of character and vulnerability.”

How long was this book in the making? How does it feel to finally have it out in the world?

Brooke King: It is a bit nerve-wracking to have it out in the world, but then I remember that it took me four years to get it there, and even longer to try and write the book. I struggled with what people would think of me and what I have been through in my life, and then it dawned on me. The 19-year-old girl I was then doing all those things is not the same person that I am today, and so I gave myself permission, in a sense, to just let the criticism slide away. Yes, there are going to be people that judge what I did or shame me for falling in love with an officer when I was a married woman, but to me, that girl no longer exists. A mother of three no, I don’t even know who that girl is anymore because I am so far removed from who she was and to me, that is what makes it okay to have this book out in the world for all to read.

AW: I have to ask, because my kids (especially my 11-year-old son) are magnetically drawn to the book’s cover: what’s the significance of Boba Fett? Is that your tattoo?

BK: So, it’s funny you should ask. The Fett tattoo is mine. It’s located on the inside of my left forearm. I originally got it because I wanted to get a tattoo that symbolized my nickname, “War Flower.” And because I am a writer and symbolism is everything, the meaning behind it is kind of cool, but also very nerdy. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter from the Star Wars lore. And here is where my nerd shows through... He ultimately was a war byproduct of his father Jango Fett who was a general for the Clone Army during the Clone Wars. The

symbolism behind it is that during his hardships of growing up, he turned away from the traditions of the Mandalorians and chose to follow his own path, and so having him blooming out of a flower seemed to be a perfect metaphor for *War Flower*. The design staff over at University Nebraska Press asked for what my interpretation of *War Flower* was and I mentioned that I had it tattooed on me. I sent them over the image of my tattoo along with the meaning behind it and they loved it so much, they decided to use it.

AW: I'm a fan of the Fetts, so I think that's pretty cool. (I have even dressed as a Mandalorian, but that's another story.) Anyway, I love your tattoo, and it makes a perfect cover.

So, the book's synopsis begins, "Brooke King has been asked over and over what it's like to be a woman in combat." I found an intriguing hint of an answer to that in the line, "Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man." What does that mean, exactly?

BK: It means that there is a time in every female soldier's service where she is forced to grow up. But for me, as a female soldier who saw a lot of things that normally I wouldn't have, I was forced to grow up, but then thrown into a situation that normally is reserved for a male soldier sort of forced me to become emotionally and mentally like a male soldier. In a sense, I was forced into survival mode by adapting to what male soldiers would normally go through in the harsh condition of combat.

AW: And yet, even though many women have served in combat over the last decade and more, you share an anecdote about being driven by your grandfather to the local VA upon your return home and encountering not one, but two VA employees who meet your explanation of combat trauma with disbelief and even

hostility: "A man comes in, asks me to follow him to the TBI and spinal injury ward. He points to the men inside the room, tells me to think long and hard about lying about combat before I tell him anything more."

First of all, what an asshole. But also: How is it possible that such a disconnect can exist, not only between female veterans and the civilian public, but even between women vets and the civilian professionals meant to serve them?

BK: I think it stems from the concern that women are supposed to be the bearers of life, so to think that a woman can be hurt in the same way as a man at war, it makes people uneasy. However, I think the disconnect about female veterans comes from lack of knowledge. Civilians just didn't know to what extent women were involved in OIF and OEF, and because of that, they have a hard time believing when a woman comes in for help with combat PTSD or combat related injuries. In order for this stigma or misconception to diminish, the government and female veterans really do need to speak up and account for that missing link of information. I know that personally speaking up has helped thousands of other women because I was one of the first women to go through combat PTSD treatment from OIF. I went through a lot of trial and error for years until I was able to find a regimen that worked for me.

AW: *War Flower* alternates between sections of traditional first-person memoir, and brief chapters of creative nonfiction in which you imagine your way into the minds of other people—a teenage Iraqi girl, a tormented young boy—and even (as in "Dog Tags") inanimate objects. How and when did the structure of the book become clear to you? Did it begin as a more traditional memoir, or did you always know that you wanted it to be more of a kaleidoscopic view of war and homecoming?

BK: I began writing the book several years ago and it wasn't until I ran into a part of the memoir where I couldn't remember all the details correctly enough that I began to

imagine what it would be like to be that person. I am referring to the section "Ghosts" where I imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi girl on the other side of the war. After I wrote this section, I realized that memories are a jumbled mess of information recollected over time, and someone with combat PTSD has memories that are distorted by their trauma, so when I went back to rethink the structure, I decided that the structure should mimic my memories; fragmented, disjointed, and at times kaleidoscopic.

AW: Your wartime experience appears to have given you an empathy with veterans of former wars, and particularly for Vietnam veterans. In the chapter "Legacy," you very sensitively craft a sort of plural voice of Vietnam vets: "I am nothing, they would say. I am the fault of my government, my father. I am plagued with nothing but lies. I did what I was told."

This tone seems matched by one of your early observations about your time in Iraq: "We didn't know the names of the streets or which roads led to nowhere. When shit hit the fan, sometimes we didn't know which direction to fire the bullets...In the end the only thing we knew for certain was that we were all soldiers stuck in the same godforsaken country until the military let us leave or we died, whichever came first."

Do you think there is a particular understanding between veterans of Vietnam and the GWoT?

BK: I think there is a sort of "oneism" that comes from being a combat veteran. There is a silent understanding that even though your war was somewhere different, you can still share that bond of knowing they went through hell as well. So you adopt with it this perspective of empathy towards other combat

veterans of foreign wars. You know their struggle because you are silently struggle with the same issue. Though by no means was the homecoming I received the same as the Vietnam veterans, but it is that quiet understanding amongst us that to suffer and see war changes you into someone else, that there is a slow coming back process that each veteran must take. Some get there sooner than others and some never find their way back to the person they were before war.

AW: You mention reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* while in Iraq. I'd love to hear more about your reading (and listening!) life during your military service—boot camp, wartime—because it seems that this kind of inner world is so linked to a person's state of mind at difficult or transformational moments. (Did you listen to the Grateful Dead in Iraq, for example, or did that just bring back too many memories of your dad?)

BK: When I was deployed I listen all sorts of music. On days when I needed to unburden my soul a bit, I would turn on the Grateful Dead and listen to Jerry's guitar in "Stella Blue" crying out to me, allowing me to feel the emotions that I needed in order to get through another day. Other days, I would stare at a blank page in my notebook unable to write a single line. Halfway through my deployment, I stopped reading and writing all together. I stopped listening to the Grateful Dead and listened more to heavy metal like Cradle of Filth and Dark Funeral. Some of soldiers around me listened to Slipknot. Sometimes I went days without anything but the sound of mortar rounds exploding and helicopters flying overhead, soldiers laughing and arguing in the smoke area, and sometimes, I just listened to the wrench I was holding while I laid underneath a truck ratcheting a bolt down. The sounds of war and of home coagulate if you let them, so I made it a point to never let the two intermingle for too long because I become either homesick or pissed off that I was still stuck in Iraq.

AW: Metal! Were you a fan before you went to Iraq, or did you

start listening to it there?

BK: I listened to Pantera and Slayer, and I think I even listened Iron Maiden, but I really didn't listen to it too much before. I was a punk rock kid growing up so I listened more to the Ramones, Rancid, Anti-flag, and Bouncing Souls, that sort of stuff. It wasn't until the guys in the PSD team put on Slipknot and Cradle of Filth that I began to listen to more mainstream metal. And even then, it was only because one day I was smoking a cigarette and I began to really pay attention to the lyrics and was honestly blown away by how poetic Corey Taylor's lyrics were, and it sort of resonated within my soul how I was feeling at the time and gave me some sort of tragically fucked-up sense of peace to know someone else had a dissonance within themselves they were wrestling with, in a way listening to it made it feel as though there weren't two different women inside of me trying to tear my body in half so that they could both be free. I felt that the war for me was a constant struggle between who I wanted to be as a human being and the person I had to be in order to survive, and for me, music sort of helped calm the tearing apart of my soul.

AW: Well, I think that's a really powerful explanation of what music does best.

Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish, in retrospect, that you'd included?

BK: I think every writer wishes they had put something in the book that they forgot, but for me, I struggled with whether or not to include more about my late ex-husband. He passed away right after I signed my contract and though he was happy that the book was getting published, I wish I had incorporated more about our marriage, more about how he was the one to save me in Iraq from not only the war, but from myself. He truly was a wonderful man and I wish I had incorporated more of that in there. The next book, however, does pick up where this one

left off, so maybe there is time to redeem myself.

AW: I was very sorry to hear of your loss. For what it's worth, I think the book paints him in a positive light—as a mostly helpful, concerned person for whom life was not particularly easy.

What were the hardest and most effortless parts of the book to write?

You always want to say that the easiest parts of the book are the ones where you talk about your family, but for me, the easiest part to write in the book were the wartime sections. Because I had gone through so much therapy and introspective at myself and war, it became very easy to write it down. To me, the hardest part was writing about my family. I really didn't want to write about my upbringing. It wasn't something I wanted to put in the book simply because I couldn't dedicate enough space to the matter that it needed, and so I ended up summarizing those parts and it really pained me to do that in particular because I knew I would be leaving huge sections of my life out that needed to be discussed fully. I also feel bad about it because I shed some of my family members in a very negative light, much to their dismay, and I have gotten flack for it by them, but in my defense, I did tell them that the next book was going to discuss more of family and less of war. It also was extremely hard to dissect my marriage that at the time I was writing the book was in steady decline. How was I supposed to write about falling in love with my husband when I knew he was somewhere else with another woman? But I found another reason as to why to tell that love story; my twin boys, who the book is dedicated to. I wanted them to know who their father was when I met him and even more so now that he has passed, so I wrote everything down as though we were still in love and tried to remember those memories instead.

AW: In the Sierra Nevada MFA program, you were able to work with writers who were not just talented at their craft but are

also combat veterans. What did this mean for you in developing confidence as a writer? Do you think your MFA experience would have been different if it had not included other veteran-writers?

BK: Being in the SNC MFA wasn't just about being surrounded by combat veteran writers, it was about being surrounded by talented writers. I found that I was more so inspired to tell my story from the non-veteran writers than I was the faculty that were veterans. Of course, it helped that I had other vets cheering me on in my journey as a writer, but writers like Patricia Smith reading "Siblings." Gah! It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it now. Colum McCann. Rick Moody. Writers, truly amazing writers inspire and light a fire underneath your ass, and I think the director bringing those writers is what really helped me become the writer I am.

AW: I love hearing that. I had a similar feeling when I went into my MFA program, too—that I was finally joining a creative culture that I felt I'd been seeing from the outside for a long time. And we can all use a creative fire lit under our asses, I suspect. What projects are you working on next?

I have started writing my new book, nonfiction of course. It really does pick up where "War Flower" left off, and traces the roots of my childhood while raising my children, the ups and downs of my marriage to James, my struggle with PTSD, and the death of James which damn near almost broke me. To say that this second book is going to be a hard one to write is an understatement, but I think will be almost like an emotional enema, and will really be interesting for readers who are struggling with PTSD, or the loss of a veteran to suicide, or even being a parent struggling to raise your kids. What made "War Flower" so unique was that I was a woman with combat PTSD, but having PTSD while trying to raise kids is a whole other beast that I really didn't tackle full on in "War Flower" so the next book is really going to explore transgenerational trauma and female veteran related issues

that surround combat PTSD.

AW: Can't wait to read it. Thanks so much for talking with me, an sharing your work with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

New Nonfiction from Brooke King: "Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen"

Ghosts

The young Iraqi girl stared back at me, her face covered over in black; only her eyes shown out from under the cloth. For years the girl I saw in the marketplace haunted me. I used to wonder what she saw. We were almost the same height, and though I had armor and a weapon, she stood there across the street from me staring at me as though she couldn't decide if I was a friend she'd once known long ago when she was child. We did not speak to one another, but I often wondered what I would have said to her, what she would have said to me. She stood beside her mother, who was waiting for water and aid from one of the soldiers who was handing out supplies from an LMTV truck bed. The girl's hands were clasped onto one another, her gaze direct. Her abaya and hijab covered her figure and her hair, only leaving the eyes for me to see. They were restraints from her religion, but they did not seem to bother her. She had lived that way as long as she could remember. She watched her mother carry out the same routine in the morning before she ever left the house: this is how you wrap the hijab around the head to cover the hair, she would say, pin it here underneath the throat and wrap the rest up and over the head. As a girl, she practiced it every day. Now

a young adult, the girl had a hijab that was perfect, wrapped tightly and neatly around her head, the black shielding her from me. Her eyes peered at mine, locked in an understanding that this was her home, her street, the marketplace where her father sold spices, and though I was only there to make sure she received water and medical aid, I felt as though I were an intruder. I smiled at her, and it was then that she looked at my rifle. Two days from now the marketplace will be a pile of trash, rubble, and bodies. She will be dead. Her mother will cry out for her, not knowing in the chaos where she is, and the next time I look at her in the eyes, there will be no life in them. But I did not know that now. Right now, she stared back at me, as if to acknowledge that we were both trapped, that at some point one or both of us will die, and that for a short while we must continue living, if only to come to the understanding that the world consists of people waiting to die.



The Only Stars I've Seen

The Paladin tanks of First Cavalry, Eight-Second Field Artillery, had been firing shell rounds for an hour, creating a low-lying fog around the base from the barrel smoke of their guns. Their constant firing echoed like thunder and the flash bangs from their turret barrels reflected off the smoke like lightning. The war-generated storm that had engulfed our base reflecting the mirage of a foreign battleground from history's past. Atop the back wall of our base, our brigade colors flew true in the slight wind that had picked up. It had made the battle sounds of firing guns less persistent, as the artillery unit battled not only the wind but the incoming barrage of mortar rounds that were starting to land inside our concrete barrier-lined base.

It had been a few months since my near-death experience with the mortar round, but I still couldn't sleep; the residual pain in my healing shin and the noise outside kept me awake. I'd climbed to the top of my tin-roofed hooch, and as darkness fell I sat there thinking about what every soldier far from any familiarity would think about—home. I thought back to Kyle and the last night I spent in his pickup, his hand trying to find a space on my leg—how he finally settled on my knee, firmly holding it with his sweaty palm. I remembered wishing that he had found a place for his hand closer than my knee. I thought back about what I could've said in the silence of that cab or what I could've done, but I knew only a good fuck and an "I love you" would have made him wait for me. I looked out beyond the concrete walls lined with razor-edged concertina wire and realized how stupid I'd been to leave home and come to this hellhole. All I wanted now was Kyle's loaded "I love you's" and the warmth of his suggestive hand on my knee.

The outgoing fire had ceased. The smoke from the barrels was too thick, making vision nearly impossible. From my perch, sitting in the rusted lawn chair I had acquired earlier from the smart-mouthed medic who lived behind me, I watched as the

smoke slowly rose into the air. I'd been trying to fall asleep when the outgoing fire started, but I now found myself looking up at the night sky, waiting for the outgoing guns to start up again. It was the only sound of war I looked forward to.

Whenever the cannon cockers of Eighty-Second Field Artillery began outgoing fire, it was tradition for Tina and me to watch the outgoing shells. The artillery unit had missions only when the sky was completely clear. Normally it was covered with smog, sandstorms, or clouds. Tina and I missed the clear skies of our homes in California—dark nights full of twinkling stars and crisp, cool night air that could suck the breath out of you if you didn't wear enough layers. Of course it was dangerous to be outside because of the return fire, but we braved it. It was the closest we could get to seeing the night sky, a taste of home. I had gotten the bright idea one night to sit on top of the roof of our hooch while incoming mortar rounds were whistling into the perimeter of the base, but it only took one time for Tina and me to be sent scrambling from incoming mortar fire for her to say that she was never going up there again. But those nights were few in number. Most times I sat for hours by myself on the roof looking up at the stars. When Tina joined me, I'd sit down on the stoop with her, swapping funny stories or talking about our families, and sometimes we just sat without saying anything, just looking up at the clear night sky, listening to the incoming and outgoing fire.

Tonight Tina had been called into company headquarters for the first shift of radio duty, and so I was left alone to watch the night sky by myself. The military field chair I had acquired from outside of First Sergeant Hawk's hooch stood beside me empty, as I sat in the white plastic chair I stole from a Charlie Company medic for mouthing off to me in the showers the night before. The smoke was beginning to lift, but I guess not fast enough for the Eight-Second's gun bunnies because they began to shoot flares up into the night sky,

staining it with red streaks of bright light. The flares' light gave away my position, and Sergeant Lippert, who happened to be passing by, looked up and found me sitting on the roof.

"King," he shouted up, "just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The sound of his hard voice shouting up to me made me jump. Soldiers were not allowed on their roofs because of safety issues, something Tina and I ignored at least once a week. We had managed thus far not to get caught.

"Hey," I said, clearing my throat, trying to come up with a bullshit explanation that he knew was going to be a lie. "I just wanted to get a look at the action that's going on by the back gate."

He glared at me in disbelief. Normally soldiers didn't intentionally put themselves in harm's way, but that didn't matter much to me anymore. He kept staring up at me. I knew he was contemplating whether or not my excuse for being on the roof warranted his attention. A couple of seconds had gone by before he looked like he'd come to the conclusion that I was up to no good.

He yelled at me and pointed to the ground, "Get the fuck down from there. It's one in the morning. You don't need to see anything but the back of your eyelids."

I leaned forward in my seat and peered down at him. "Not to be a smart-ass or anything," I said, as I gestured down at him, "but you're not exactly slamming back zzz either."

I was still sitting in my seat atop the roof when Sergeant Lippert stomped closer, with a heaviness to his stride like he was putting out a fire with each step. He didn't look pissed off, but his stiff and quick gait suggested he was none too thrilled at my remark. In a few seconds he was next to my

front door and I was stuck on the roof, cornered. For a couple of seconds he disappeared and then reappeared again.

“Hey, King, how the hell did you get up there?”

I leaned out of my chair, cringing as if he was already within arm’s length of me with his hand stretched out trying to snatch me up. “You’re not going kick my ass or anything, are you?”

“No, now tell me how you got up there or I am going to kick your ass.”

For a split second I contemplated whether or not he was bluffing about kicking my ass, but looking down ten feet at him next to my front door, I realized that either way I was fucked. I sighed and said, “All you do is scale the side of the concrete bunker by sticking your feet in the metal rings on the sides. Then when you’re on top of the bunker, swing a leg up onto the roof.”

He started up, his combat boots slipping on the bunker wall. “It’s easy, once you get the hang of it,” I said, as I watched him struggle up the side. He looked like a dog trying to scale a chain-link fence to get to a cat. It took him three tries before he finally got to the bunker roof, and next thing I knew he was sitting next to me in First Sergeant Hawk’s chair.

“This chair looks familiar.”

“Really?” I said, looking away from Sergeant Lippert, who was inspecting the chair. “It’s Specialist Kennedy’s.”

Trying to shift Sergeant Lippert’s attention from the familiarity of the first sergeant’s lounge chair, I quickly changed the subject.

“So,” I said with a nonchalant smile, “what brings you up here?”

"I wanted to see if your bullshit excuse about being able to see the action was true. But from what I can see, you have a pretty good view of the back gate."

"Yeah, well," I paused. "That bit about the artillery wasn't exactly true."

We both looked at the back wall; the gun bunnies had reloaded the guns and were getting into position inside the turret. The fog from the guns had started to lift and the night sky was visible again—the stars breaking through the haze in patches.

"I thought so," Sergeant Lippert said, as he shifted his weight in the chair to look at me. "So what the fuck are you really doing up here?"

"Don't laugh, okay?"

Private, tell me what the fuck's going on or I'm going drag you down from here," he said, pointing to the ground, "and smoke the shit out of you."

"Okay, okay." I took a deep breath. I knew he wasn't going to believe me, but telling him the truth was better than doing pushups until I couldn't feel my arms. "Specialist Kennedy and I come up here when the artillery is going off because it's the only time you can see the stars at night." I pointed up to the sky. "That's what we do up here."

As I spoke, he looked up, then back at me, and then back at the sky as if to study if I was fucking with him or not. For a minute I watched him, his head tilted back, quietly looking up.

"You know," he said, his voice dropping a little, "if you sit on the deck of my parents' house back in Austin, Texas, you can see a whole sea of stars. So many stars, you can't even begin to count them." He leaned back in the chair, arching his neck so he could get a better view. "I used to love sitting

out there on summer nights with my kids. I used to point out the constellations. The kids would point at other stars, trying to make them into different things.” He was smiling with his hands on his chest. “Jeanie, my youngest one, she loves horses. She’d swear up and down that Orion’s Belt was really a horse.” He laughed and glanced at me. “You couldn’t tell her anything,” he said, shaking his head, “stubborn, just like you.”

I looked over at him. He didn’t say anything for a minute but sat there quietly squinting up. I could tell he was thinking about the same thing Tina and I thought about when we came up on the roof to look at the stars—home. Though he was probably thinking about more memories of his wife and kids, I was thinking about my dad and where he lived now in Colorado. He always used to tell me about this lake, Turquoise Lake, where he would go camp out underneath the big Colorado sky. I wanted to be there now.

I turned and looked back up at the sky and said, “You know what’s great about the stars?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going tell me,” he said, as a smirk cracked across his face.

“Constellations never move, only the earth does, so no matter where you are in the world, your loved ones are staring at the same sky as you are right now. It’s like looking up at a little piece of home.”

For a while, Sergeant Lippert sat there staring up at the sky. Then he looked at me and nodded before he got up from the rickety chair and started scaling back down to the ground. “You okay?” I asked, as I watched him move down the side of the bunker and then disappear out of sight.

Below me, the gravel shifted and rustled. I stuck my head out over the edge of the roof to make sure he’d made it down all right. After a moment he reappeared below, brushing off some

dirt from his ACU top. He shouted up to me, "King, don't fucking stay up there all night, you hear me?"

I smirked. "You got it, Sarge."

I watched him walk down the aisle of hooches. He'd just disappeared around the last hooch on the corner when I heard Tina call to me. I chuckled at Tina's skinny, gangly legs striding out of sync as she walked toward our hooch, flinging gravel behind her.

I called her name as she got closer to the door. She looked up. I smiled.

"No way in hell."

"C'mon, I got you a chair."

Slinging her M16 over her shoulder and scaling up the side of the bunker, she shouted, "We better not get in trouble for this!" I decided not to tell her about Sergeant Lippert or the fact that I had thrown her under the bus a little bit. As she made her way onto the roof of the bunker and then onto the roof of our hooch, I said, "You'll be fine."

"Where'd the chairs come from?"

Smiling coyly at her, I said, "You really want to know?"

With one eyebrow raised, Tina said, "Ah, something tells me no. I heard over the radio that the outgoing fire is going to start any minute now."

"Did you happen to grab any munchies?"

She plopped down in First Sergeant Hawk's chair, set her m16 next to her, opened both cargo pockets of her ACU pants, and pulled out two bags of Hot Cheetos. She handed me one of the bags.

"Thanks, battle."

"Anytime," Tina said, smiling.

Opening our bags of Cheetos, we leaned back in our chairs. We peered up at the clear night sky as we waited for the outgoing fire to start up again, both content to sit and gaze at the stars all night. Again my mind wandered home. I missed the routine sounds of familiarity, the slamming of the front door, Grandpa yelling, "Don't slam the door!" The low chuckle Nana used to make every time I purposely slammed it so I could hear Grandpa holler at me from wherever he was in the house. I missed Dad's loud music, the crackled sound of the stereo blaring Grateful Dead that echoed in the driveway like an amphitheater. I missed how Dad burst in the door every night, yelling with a crescendo in his greeting, "Hello!" I thought about the last time I'd called home just to hear their voices. I'd only gotten the answering machine, the sound of Nana's voice, "Hello, you've reached the Kings. We're not home right now, but if you leave a name, number, and a brief message, we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you and have a beautiful day."

I closed my eyes, trying to see the faces I knew so well. But the memory was blurred. I clenched my teeth in anger. I needed home right now.

"Do you think it's too late to call the West Coast?"

Underneath her patrol cap, Tina was trying to figure out the time difference as though it were a calculus equation. Using a Cheeto and an invisible chalkboard, Tina leaned out of her chair, counting the hours with her Cheeto, trying to deduce the correct answer. Nodding her head in agreement at her calculations, she turned in her chair and said, "I think it's only five in the afternoon in California."

I lifted up my ACU sleeve and looked at my watch. It was one in the morning. Nana was always my first choice. Counting nine hours back from my time, I realized that it was only four in

the afternoon California time.

“Tina, you suck at counting.”

“What?” she said, raising one hand in the air, a Cheeto caught in between her index finger and thumb.

“It’s four in the afternoon, not five.”

Throwing me a cocky look, Tina’s green eyes stared at me, daring me to challenge her again. “No, Brooke, it’s five.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, shaking my head. “You count back nine hours from our time. It’s one in the morning here, which means it’s four in the afternoon in Cali.”

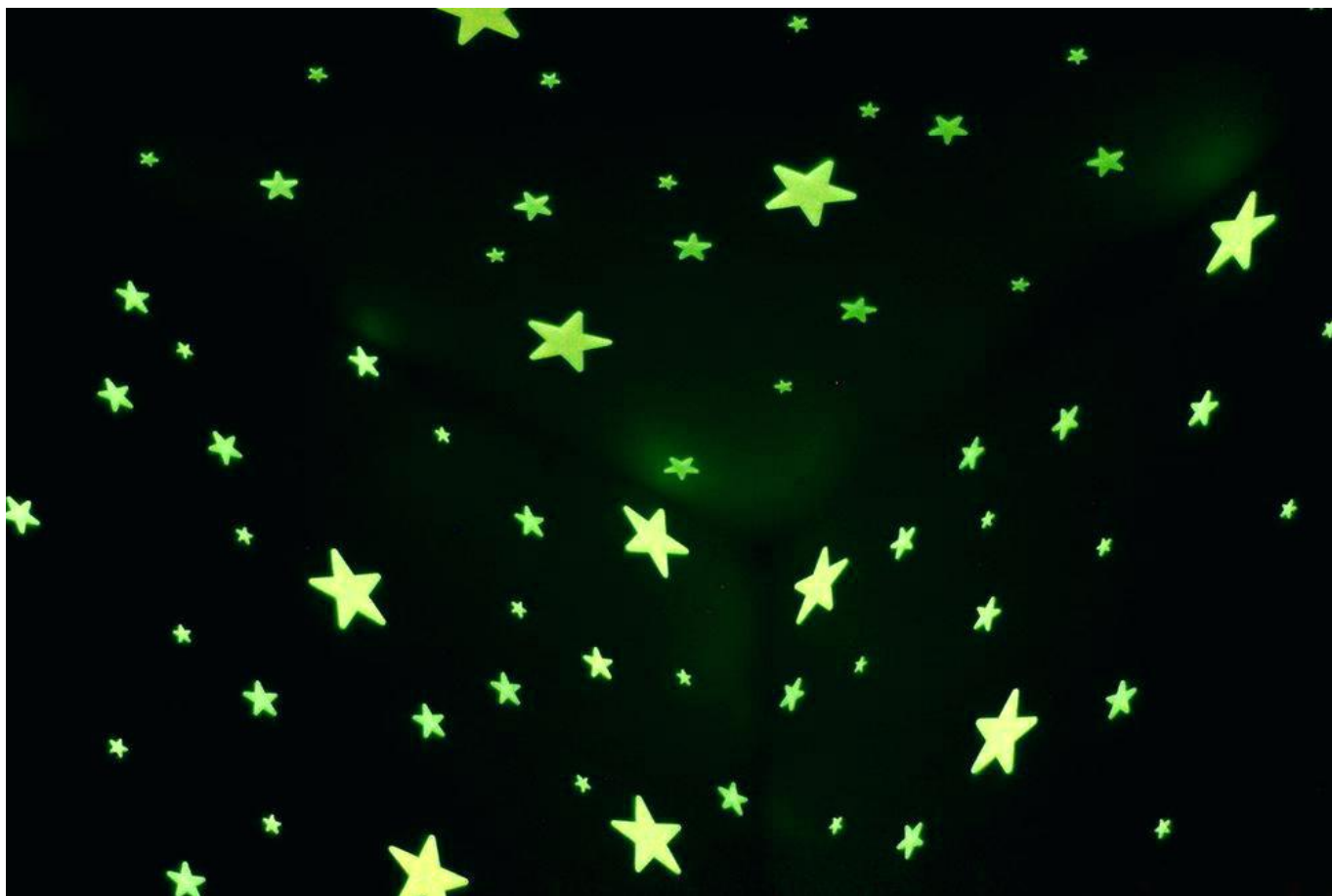
With a furrowed brow, Tina threw a Cheeto at me. “Whatever.”

It bounced off my forearm and onto the tin roof. “Waster,” I said, leaning over and tossing it into my mouth.

I decided to give a phone call a shot, hoping to reach Nana. It was Thursday, which meant that she’d be home from her stint at Saint Therese’s, where she sat in the chapel every Thursday for an hour to pray. As I pulled out my phone—a red Motorola Razor, the only perk of being stationed so close to the Green Zone in Baghdad—I contemplated what to tell Nana. I couldn’t tell her that I was having a hard time being in Iraq and that I was seeing way more combat than I anticipated. You just didn’t say those things to Nana. She was a gentle and sensitive Old Italian grandma who got what she called “worrying stomachaches.” Ever since she’d had her bleeding ulcer two years back, I had tried not to worry her about my army stuff. She was having a hard enough time with the fact that I’d been deployed.

I dialed my home phone number, hoping that Nana would pick up. I let it ring twice but then closed the top of the cell phone and hung up. It felt wrong to call home, but I needed to hear her voice. Her gentle but frail voice always reassured me that

everything, no matter how bad, was going to be okay. I opened the phone back up and dialed again. I sat waiting, looking up at the stars, thinking of my bedroom back home. For my seventh birthday I had begged my dad to buy me a packet of plastic stars that I could stick on my ceiling. Grandpa had said no, but Dad ignored him and bought them anyway. The night of my birthday my dad woke me up at midnight to give me my gift: the ceiling above my head covered with stars and even a glow-in-the-dark full moon. He had snuck up to my room and put them up while I was sleeping. Of course Grandpa was mad, but by the time I was in high school I had bought enough stars to cover the whole ceiling, so I had the constellations inside my bedroom. I looked up at the night sky and thought of my room with all the twinkling stars plastered to my blue ceiling as I sat there waiting for someone to pick up the phone at home, but it rang four times before going straight to the answering machine. Nana's voice—a resonating crackled sound that echoed through the receiver I held to my ear. Tears welled in the corner of my eyes. From the other end I listened to the background noise of the greeting—the living room TV turned on, the sound of someone shuffling past in the kitchen, the distant sound of Molly, my Alaskan malamute, barking at the back door. As the greeting came to an end, Nana's voice grew louder as she said to have a beautiful day. The usual cadence of silence passed before I was prompted by the answering machine beep to leave my message. In a shaky crackled voice I said, "Hi, Nana. I couldn't sleep and just wanted to hear the sound of a familiar voice. I guess you're still at the church, probably praying for me not to die here. I guess I'll call tomorrow or something. I, ah . . ." I tried to rush the rest of my message before I totally lost it. "I miss you and love you. Talk to you later, bye."



I slapped the phone shut and shoved it back into my pocket. I was a total wreck. I threw my hands over my face and bent forward, resting my head on my knees.

Looking up from her bag of chips, Tina asked, "You okay?" I turned my head toward Tina, wiped my tears onto my uniform, and said, "Ah, no. I think I successfully just left the worst message a granddaughter, who is at war, could've left on the family answering machine."

Leaned back in the chair with her legs crossed, Tina canted her head toward me, raised her eyebrows, and nodded her head in agreement as she said, "Yeah, that was pretty bad."

Chuckling, I wiped snot from the back of my hand onto my black pt shorts and said, "Oh gee, thanks, Tina."

"Eat a Cheeto." Tina handed me the one in her hand. "It'll make you feel better."

Shoving the Cheeto into my mouth, I let the hot flavor of the chip dissolve in my mouth, hoping that it would take away the longing for home that I felt, but it wasn't making my homesickness go away fast enough. I started shoving them in one after another until my mouth felt like I had just shoved ten habaneros inside of it, but I still didn't feel any better. I didn't feel anything but the need for the normality of home.

"Ease up on the Cheetos, Brooke." Tina put a hand on my arm, preventing me from putting another Cheeto in my mouth. "You're throwing those things back like some anorexic chick who hasn't eaten in days."

"Fuck you," I said, spattering half-chewed debris from my full mouth.

Tina just shook her head at me, eased her hand off my arm, pulled another chip from her bag, turned to me, raised one of her Cheetos in the air, and said, "To home."

I leaned over out of my chair, put my arm on her shoulder, raised a Cheeto, and with my mouth still stuffed full, I echoed her toast, "To home."

A loud booming sound rippled through the air like a shock wave. The outgoing fire had begun again, but it didn't bother me. I was thinking of my bedroom, of home.

"Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen" have been excerpted from [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#) by Brooke King (Potomac Books 2019).