

New Nonfiction from Erin Carpenter: “Fully Involved: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Date Night”

Part 1: The Healing Shed

In 2016, my husband burned our guesthouse to the ground. He left a t-shirt over a lightbulb while painting the eaves, and the fire inspector said the motion detector probably kept turning the light on in the wind, eventually causing a spark. Kent works meticulously and always cleans up; I think there was some moonshine involved in this oversight. But it was the year of the Gatlinburg wildfires, and by fall we would be seeing the worst inferno the East Coast had experienced in the better part of a century. Even in April, fires burned in the Big Cove, Yellowhill and Birdtown communities of Cherokee, enough to delay school due to smoke. So like so many things in our life together, he probably doesn't deserve all the blame.



photo: Brian Lary

I woke up bathed in orange light feeling so cozy that it was hard to get out of bed. If it weren't for his service dog's persistent whimpering, I don't think I would have budged. I stepped out onto the back porch and opened the screen door. The fire marshal would write a report using the words "fully involved" to describe the blaze—there was no stopping it, the best we could do was contain it. I got Kent out of bed and he stood still for long enough to yell fuck, fuck, fuck until something in his truck exploded and we started moving again. I gathered our dogs and our daughter Katie and drove to the bottom of the mountain to flag down the firefighters. The first volunteer arrived within seven minutes of the 911 call – he told me later he found Kent up on the roof with a garden hose, wetting down the siding and the deck.

For over a month, we let the pile burn, and salvaged what we could. A page from my thesis director's first novel survived. Our neighbor Jim, a Vietnam vet with a steel plate in his head, asked for the metal hand tools, planning to hammer them back into shape somehow, or sell them for scrap metal. But everything Kent had saved from his infantry years with the 10th Mountain Division went up in flames. His BCUs and his dress blues were still back in Idaho at his parents', but he lost the kinds of things that Tim O'Brien might have mentioned.

It took about two years to re-build. We upgraded to a 500 square foot barn-style shed with a deluxe porch package. Half of the space would be used for his workshop and the other half would be shared by me and Katie to host guests, hang out, and have more privacy than the two-bedroom main house could provide. I chose colors from Sherwin Williams' American Heritage collection to appeal to Kent's patriotism—I was still all about pleasing him then. Fireweed red for the exterior, Salty Dog blue in the bathroom. I had him install cedar fence pickets in a shiplap pattern on the walls and he reclaimed wood from the fire to use as a countertop in the breakfast nook. It had rustic charm. I loved it. What I didn't know was that he would soon be living in it.

In February, he was sent home on administrative leave from his position on the road crew of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park because a co-worker blew the whistle on him for carrying a personal firearm in his lunchbox. I had questioned him about this choice over the years, but he had his reasons. The most obvious is he's been shot at, a lot. And although he was not in an urban environment like Mogadishu, he worked in remote locations where people often went to disappear. It can take an hour for law enforcement rangers to respond to a call, and they work alone. In Kent's view, he was protecting himself and his crew. The gun never came out of the lunchbox until it was confiscated, which happened just a few days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland,

Florida.

I don't like to make excuses for Kent, and as a schoolteacher, I am as concerned about gun violence as anyone else, but just a month or so earlier, he had finally approached his supervisor and asked to bring his service dog to work. The request had been denied. His claim for a service-connected disability rating with the VA had been denied numerous times over the years as well. His relationship with his boss was strained, and his irritability was high. This would be true for me as well if I had finally come to terms with the severity of my condition and found the courage to speak out and ask for help, only to be denied accommodations or even acknowledgment that my experience was valid. So although I always disliked the fact that he carried a weapon in his lunchbox, I believe he was resorting to the only coping mechanism he was capable of at the time. But unfortunately, his indiscretion cost him his career in federal service.

When the National Park Service finally asked for his resignation, he turned to a twelve pack of high-octane beer for solace. I found him lying in the loft of the shed surrounded by storage bins and staring at the ceiling, conscious but unwilling to talk. An hour later, I heard yelling and crashing noises. I had just started watching *The Greatest Showman* with Katie. (The soundtrack would make me cry for a year afterwards.) I went out to find him ripping open and overturning anything that was not nailed down: motorcycles, tool chests that were more like wardrobes, a rack of winter clothes that he had moved out of our bedroom so I could have a closet.

"I'm taking your guns," I said.

"Take them!" he yelled, and I grabbed his Glock off the only upright surface left in the room and left.

I called my therapist who told me to call the police. "He

can't act like that. You have a child." I was afraid for his safety, not mine. I was afraid for my daughter's emotional well-being, though she only complained that I was on the phone too long and wouldn't sit to watch the movie. Having him removed from the property seemed tragic, but so did finding him dead in the shop, so I called the VA-suicide hotline and tried to make him talk to them. He just mumbled about how he was "done." They patched me through to the police.

"Does he have any firearms?" they asked.

"Yes. He has a Glock pistol and a semi-automatic rifle. But I locked them in my trunk and hid the keys and cartridges."

"That's all?"

"Yes." His other Glock, the one in the lunchbox, was supposed to have been destroyed by the authorities after he was found guilty of the misdemeanor of carrying without a permit, but it would be returned a couple weeks later at the federal courthouse in Asheville after the judge decided he had no legal basis for keeping his weapon from him. "Good luck to you, sir," the man had said to Kent. I thought he should be talking to me.

"How does he feel about law enforcement?" asked the police officer.

"He doesn't like them, to be honest."

"And why is that?"

"I guess it's because they're always around when he gets in trouble."

"What about dogs?"

"A rottweiler, a doberman mix, and a mountain cur."

"Are you sure he doesn't have any other weapons? Like a secret

stash?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"My wife doesn't know about half of my guns," he said.

The officer's confession felt much too casual, too conversational for the crisis I was facing in my mind. More than anything, I was afraid for what this incident meant for my life and Katie's, and I knew at that moment that the men on the phone wouldn't be fixing my dilemma. I had never wanted to leave Kent, but had often wondered whether I should, and I was already negotiating with myself on how I could justify staying with a violent man. He would have to stop drinking. He would have to go back to therapy. Maybe he could move into the guesthouse until he was stable.

The officers arrived and strolled over to the outbuilding, but by that time, Kent had apparently climbed out the window (since all of the doors were blocked by the demolition) and wandered off into the woods. I directed them to our neighbor Jim's house, where they found Kent and brought him to the hospital. Knowing he was under someone else's care that night brought a profound sense of relief. I heard myself saying, "I need help. I can't do this alone anymore."

He passed their test. He was not a threat to himself or others, so he was free to leave the next morning. I asked Jim to take him down to the VA in Asheville and let them do a full psychiatric evaluation. I set up the appointment. But Kent was hungry and didn't have his wallet, and so Jim brought him home. I presented my demands. I told him I'd be giving his guns to a friend in law enforcement for safekeeping.

"Fine, but you have to stop drinking too," he said.

I knew I couldn't continue drinking. For thirteen years of marriage, and for many years before, the wine had guaranteed that I could find happiness and some form of companionship at

the end of the day. Kent has never been much of a talker, but a beer or two, or sometimes three or four, would always help open him up. Now the stakes had gotten too high for even my moderate dependency. My husband was going downhill fast. I had watched him destroy things he needed, even loved, out of anger, and thought he might take the rage out on himself. Was I okay being married to someone who could do that? How would this affect my daughter? I didn't know the answer, but I knew drinking made me complacent. I have been sober since that day.

He moved into the shed. Two weeks later, he said he was stable and wanted his guns back. "If you don't give them back, next time I might not be so trusting," he said. He had been sober and attending his mental health appointments. He was either comatose, or irritable, but the bulk of his anger seemed to have turned inward, so mustering all the trust I could find, I met my friend on the side of the freeway, and she loaded his guns into my trunk. I turned them over and invited him to move back to the house.

"I'm good," he said.

Over the next several months, Kent took Katie to school and picked her up from dance. Beyond that, he was a ghost. I'd go out to ask him to eat with us, to come watch a movie, to give me a hug. On a good day, he would turn his face from the TV to say no. Most of the time, he wouldn't even look at me.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"Leave me alone," he replied.

"Really? That's really all you want?"

"I'm just trying to stay alive," he said.

So I went back to my living room, where I binge watched Parks and Recreation with Katie, and let her sleep in our King sized bed for the first time in her life. From time to time, I'd try

to talk to him, and fail, or try to seduce him, and succeed. Either way, such a lack of affection was evident that before long the effort became more painful than the loneliness. I thought there was another woman. I knew he wasn't the type, but I couldn't understand it any other way. If it were me, and I was treating him this way, it could only be that someone else was providing some of that lost connection.

"This has nothing to do with you," was how he saw it, and in a way he was right. But I was being told "no" all the time. I would give him his space for as long as I could stand it, and then I would go out again to check on him, to let him know I was still there. I knew he was suicidal, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it except stand by. One day, he went out with his rifle into the woods. I hoped he was with Jim, but of course he hadn't told me anything. I prayed he would come home alive.

He was drinking again—I found bottles in a wheelbarrow under the shed and soon saw him drinking when I popped in to visit. But by then I was going to 12 step meetings. I had a sponsor and a group where I could come undone and re-focus my attention onto myself. I didn't get to decide whether or not he drank. I got to decide whether or not I stayed. That decision alone required all my strength. I had spent six months trying to help heal him with words, but words mean little to those who have lost trust in people, and for a man whose only need or want is to be left alone, my choices dwindled down to one. I finally had the strength to accept that our marriage was over.

I thanked God that I had taken a full-time teaching job to help us pay for the fire, and I would have my permanent license by the end of the upcoming school year. I began to prepare for a different future. I separated our bank accounts. I took him off the credit cards. I told him I wanted to be married to him, but I wouldn't look back on 25 years with someone who didn't want to be with me.

I remember telling Katie on the way home from school that his recliner had shown back up in the living room. She seemed interested if not particularly impressed. I remember him standing in the doorway of my bedroom saying, "Don't give up on me," and coming over to kiss me while I was reading in bed. I remember resisting the urge to get close to him in bed those first few nights, trying to let him settle in, just happy to listen to him breathe.

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Part 2: The Date Dilemma

About a year and a half later, I rolled over one Sunday morning and asked Kent what he wanted to do that day. To my delight, he wanted to take us on a full moon paddle that evening. But while we were eating the croissants I had bought for my French class, a text arrived inviting Katie to the haunted corn maze in Asheville.

"What does everyone want to do?" I asked. No one spoke.

"I want us *all* to go. That was the plan," Kent said, as if this had been on the calendar for days and not just an hour. Katie stared down at her plate, and I fought the urge to cover up the silence. Maybe I should make her come. But some time alone with him would be wonderful.

"I win either way," I said. "I'll get a date with my husband or a family kayak trip."

Kent waited through another long pause and left the table. I let the fear of losing him to the TV subside and then turned to Katie.

"It seems like you don't want to disappoint your dad," I said.

"Yeah, because he'll yell at me."

I'm sure mother guilt is one of the strongest emotions at work

in America. If believing we can't be enough for our children weren't insidious enough, infecting ourselves with baby daddy guilt—the sense that you should have done better in choosing a mate—that she deserves better, that you deserve better—is one of the biggest threats to my serenity. It does nothing to clarify my vision and only makes me feel like an idiot.

“Talk to him. It's okay. Nobody's going to get hurt.”

Her scowl turned the volume up on the voices in my head. *Are you sure?* I am aware of how his anger can be frightening, and I want to protect her from it, but after years of walking on eggshells, which only ever fuels anger and resentment on both sides, I have learned to trust them to their own devices. I explained how my fear likes to tell me stories; stories I've learned to ignore. “What stories are you telling yourself?” I asked her.

I was expecting all of them but one.

“I don't want to make dad go kayaking without me. He doesn't seem that into going with just you. I'm not trying to be mean, but he seems really awkward.”

Her words confirmed my fear that my husband didn't want to date me, but I ignored myself. I had heard it time and time again; this was not about me.

“It's okay. Go tell your dad what *you* want to do today.” And she went off to the corn maze with her friends.

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Part Three: Power to Win

Kent pulled our kayaks off the truck while there was still some muted color behind the mountains. Our three-legged Rottweiler climbed into my boat, while the mountain cur tucked in with Kent and his pole, whimpering that she didn't get to go with me. The Doberman had died in August.

“Don’t cut in too close,” he said as we left the shore. “I’ve got a line out.” He moved into the dark shadows created by stacked ledges of slate rock, trying to hook a fish without the effort of casting. They call it trolling. I had to smile, thinking what a great metaphor for my marriage. But then I paddled out into the moonlight and watched it improvise on the water, happy to sit alone with my thoughts.

“Erin, where ya at?” he called out from the edge. “Come to the left.”

He knew where I was, and he wanted me closer. He was keeping an eye on me and it felt like love.

“It’s too dark to fish,” he called.

“How come? You can’t see what you caught?”

“I think I hit something.”

“Like a log?” I asked.

“Like Jaws.” He laughed. It sounded like those seagulls that pass through here on migration. Perfectly natural and totally out of place.

We moved out into the center of the lake. The occasional campfire flared, and drunken shouts and laughter could be heard. We rounded a piece of shoreline with a pine tree clinging to a ragged slope like it was the last bit of land the Earth had to offer. I felt something undermining my rhythm, forcing my body to struggle a bit more with each stroke. I looked back to the trusting eyes of my tired old dog for encouragement.

“Is it me or has it gotten very hard to paddle?” I asked Kent.

“Upstream,” he said.

We had come to that part of Fontana Lake that is also a river.

By travelling for over a hundred miles to be impounded by a 480-foot wall, the Little Tennessee river held enough energy to produce the atomic bomb. What power there is in purpose. I wish I knew with such certainty where I was headed.

When Kent was at his worst, his father came from Idaho to visit and we took him to the dam's release. It would be the only day we spent together during that whole difficult time. The spillway was open, and the spray was so massive that it appeared to form two cumulus clouds. I have a picture of Katie and I leaning against a railing looking like off-duty angels posing before the gates.

I'm not an angel—not that I haven't tried. But commitment to my veteran has taught me this: love is a powerful force, but it does not flow unimpeded, it does not exist to carry me along to my next destination, and its fluctuations are often outside my control. At times we are forced to sit in its backwater, looking closely at how we contain ourselves and where else we can find sources of hope, until enough energy has built up to push us forward.

New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You've been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,
chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over

like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.



Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams
smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.
The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond

the reach of ready palms.
A single leaf rests
on your cheek.
Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week
after our mailman's son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie's haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,
rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,
thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.

The lone sibling
stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother
lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith's armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle
the graceful hum of atonement.



William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children
replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.

**New Fiction: “Old Wounds” by
Therese Cox**



The YouTube walkthroughs have names, like action movies or episodes of a serial TV show. *Judgment Day*. *Suffer With Me*. *Fallen Angel*. *Old Wounds*. If you were playing, you'd fire up your console, scroll through the list, pick your game, and go. But Tracey Knox doesn't play. She's only here to watch. One quick click and SchoolofHardKnox is leading the way through the war.

She's watched them all, headphones on, grinding through anti-tank fire, lobbing grenades at ditches, clamoring for weapons, hoping there'd be one, just one, with a voice-over and a *howzit goin'*. How else is she going to hear Geoff's voice? Flat Michigan vowels with those U.P. dips and stalls: a sound she doesn't get a lot of in New York. She's spent hours patrolling these deserts. It's only grown worse since she lost her job at the architecture firm. There's nowhere she has to be at 9 a.m. No project manager to look over her shoulder. No more designing cat fences for rich ladies in Connecticut. She is thirty-nine and can do as she likes.

There are thousands of views. Who was Geoff making these walkthroughs for? He didn't do voice-overs, didn't narrate, never popped up mid-scene in a Fugazi t-shirt, flashing his tats, to explain strategy. Each episode is like a movie he lived once and forgot about, one long jittery dream that Trace lives over and over.

"Old Wounds." She likes the sound of that one. He dies too soon in it but it's badass and medieval to gallop on horseback, brandishing a sword pried from a skeleton's ribcage. She clicks on the name and lets it roll.

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It's Friday night at the Hampton Inn in DC. Tracey Knox is incumbent on a queen-sized bed, surrounded by plugs and remote controls. A screen flickers from her lap, lighting her face in flashes. Her eyes glazed, ears snug under industrial-sized headphones. She's been dressed in the same clothes for a week straight—baggy cammie trousers bought discount from the Gap, \$4.98, an end-of-summer deal, and a faded Jackass t-shirt. She's skinnier than usual. All week it's been nothing but sunflower seeds and Arizona iced tea, but then, the anniversary usually has that effect. At the moment she's knee-deep in a YouTube k-hole and doesn't care who knows it. Each fresh burst of gunfire grinds her guts with a bad longing. It calls back the barrage of explosions drifting down the hall from under Geoff's bedroom door. The on-screen desert had been Geoff's playground. Virtual Sergeant Foley, a stand-in for Dad.

Tracey's best girlfriend, Constance Lawson, is knocked up and across the room, embedded in a nest of Hampton Inn pillows. They've decided to do a girls' weekend in DC. Just the two of them, like the old days, one last hurrah before Constance, now Connie, becomes an FTM, or full-time mommy.

Connie had planned everything. Two queen beds and an all-you-

can-eat menu of reality TV shows and room service mocktails. Right now Connie's reading to Tracey from an upbeat email. Connie's writing a book about her experience of IVF, half memoir and half how-to. The future for mommy lit is apparently bright. She's landed a slick agent on the basis of a sample paragraph and outline and is already in negotiations for a book deal for her WIP.

"What's a W-I-P?" Tracey asks, slipping off one headphone.

"Work in Progress," says Connie, who's superstitious about names for unborn projects.

Tracey, for her part, has no reason to fire up her email on a weekend. She recoils at the memory of the last exchange before HR sent her the marching papers, a "reply all" that should very definitely not have been a "reply all." Tracey nods, says it sounds promising. She switches to half-listen mode and goes back to the screen.

On her laptop, a menu of a dozen other options pop up, all listed under her brother's screen name. She's stopped talking to people online after a Skype with their LA office went balls-up and cost Tracey her job. She's been living off her severance package above a tire shop in Greenpoint, buoyed by the salary of her Dutch bicycle-parts designing husband, Niels. Her job search is equal parts day-drinking, flirting with bartenders, and experimenting with the font size on her CV. If there's a café with free wi-fi, she's freeloading. Whenever either of her parents, divorced of course, gets her on the phone, Tracey says the same thing: she is pursuing other options.

"Do you think I should come up with a new name for TBD?" Connie asks.

"To be determined?"

"No, no, Trace, T-B-D. The Baby Dance. It's what the *What to*

Expect When You're Expecting to Be Expecting book calls sex."

"Why don't you just call it sex?"

"Because," Connie says, "That's so *louche*."

Connie reclines in yoga pants and places her hand on her swollen belly. She balances the phone on top and shows Tracey a new app, plugging in a set of hot pink earbuds. The app's main feature is the frantic liquid throb of a fetal heartbeat so Connie can eavesdrop on her unborn infant. The baby, in all its amniotic fury, pounding away. It is just a cluster of nerve endings and cells and life pushing blood through its fetal chambers, *but listen to it go*. The heartbeat hypnotizes her with its systole and diastole, evidence of its miraculous, furious progress. Connie is transfixed in the dull spell, fingers slack on the edges of her iPhone, earbuds shoved in, the better to hear the back and forth of the protean sludge. Tracey tries to ignore it but Connie insists. Through the wire comes a birdlike thrum, frantic and pulsing, the life that is both part of her yet apart from her—primordial—she is life-giving—this baby-to-be, sloshing over and over just for her, the sound (she makes Tracey listen. *Listen, Trace!*) going *mama mama mama* oh god.

"But Tracey, don't you think about it sometimes?"

Sure, Tracey thinks about it sometimes. The possibility of new life. The thing her friends are all doing, the thing she knows Niels wants. It'd be a beautiful baby: half-Dutch, half-red-blooded-American. Niels would have the kid on training wheels in no time. She could forget about the architecture. Embrace the FTM. Make their offspring her avatar.

But Tracey Knox pursues none of those things. She unhooks herself from Connie's app and slinks back to pole position, head hunched, knees curled, itching to get back to her trance. She's not even playing the game, a level way worse, just watching virtual violence, eyes glued to the stuttering

screen, explosions collapsing around her in bursts of orange and red, choppers snip-snip-snipping the sky above.

Outside the hotel room, DC lurks. Connie had come to grad school here. Tracey, dragging an art history degree behind her, had followed her out and spent a year mopping gallery floors, playing the mistress to a fastidious art buyer who lived in Dupont Circle. DC never spoke to Tracey in quite the same way it did for Connie. When Connie had first suggested it, that if they came to DC, Tracey could visit *the grave*, Tracey blanked.

“The grave,” Tracey said, nodding. “Right.”

As she fires up the next episode, she thinks maybe she’ll look Danny up again after she gets back from DC, hit him up for a couple of cold ones and ask him more questions about what else he knows about Geoff. Now that she knows the story, or enough of the story. Maybe it’s that she knows too much?

Blood and Gore Intense Violence Strong Language Suggestive Themes Mature 17+ Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Let’s roll—

She adjusts the headphones so they’re snug and then *wham!* she’s back at the helm of the war machine, flexing assault muscles and tactical ops, leaping out of choppers as shrapnel rains from tall sheared-off buildings. Jump cuts, jittery exterior shots, implausible musculature and digitized MRAPs. Quick flash of landscape porn, desert mountains and desolate horizons, fade in then fade out, the Ken Burns effect plus amphetamines, amplified and sped up and pumped out, life through the barrel of an assault rifle. She hijacks a chopper and mainlines that view from above—*I don’t see, I fly*—then *whoosh*, she’s back at ground level, hand to hand combat, slow sexy focus on metal and skin and tattoo and blood. She swims and she flies with her entourage, industrial war machine overhead in twenty parts glittering. Down below in the rubble

it's all dirt and desert and fumes, the phosphorescence of foreign war, choppers rising up in clusters and scattering.

She's shooting lasers from what looks like a souped-up staple gun, exuding godlike luster in a landscape of smoke and red sand. She's busting into hideouts and blowing up bodies, dodging the splurge of vermilion enemy blood, no time even to blow on the smoking gun. Here she is no one, she is cranked up to full speed and smoothed down to her essentials—blood and muscle and armor—kicking down doors, spitting steel. She has no womb, no wounds. Tracey Knox is a killing machine, trained to close and destroy, breach and clear, dismantling all the architecture, trafficking in the invincible.

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When Geoff Knox came back from his first deployment in Afghanistan, he was full of stories. They weren't usually what you would think of as war stories but more about things going wrong—stupid stuff, just everyday things: bad latrines and gravity-fed showers and pranks with packages. Over time the Afghan villagers had picked up certain American phrases. Sex was “up-and-down.” Bombs were “bang-bang.” The one word pretty much all of them knew was “killed.”

One day, Geoff said, there'd been a bomb in a neighboring village. The usual shit—IED—and their interpreter—their “terp,” Geoff called him—was off meeting with some village elders. So there's Geoff, asking around, trying to get a tally of the civilian dead. There was this one kid, maybe eleven or twelve, name of Omar, who spoke some English and was trying to translate. And the kid had told Geoff, “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.”

Geoff scratched his head. “Two killed, not dead? The hell does that mean?”

Omar kept saying it. “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.” It took Geoff some time to realize that by “killed, not dead,”

Omar was trying to say "hurt." The kid didn't know the word for "hurt."

There's a lesson in that now, Tracey thinks. Every wound, especially in the war, *killed* you. It's just that some wounds left you dead, and others left you alive.

I have two siblings, Tracey Knox says. She'll say it to this day, will say it to the end, whenever anyone asks. *I have two siblings, a sister and a brother*. One older sister: killed, not dead. One younger brother: killed, dead.

Tracey lost her brother, and her brother was in the war. At thirty-nine years old it was her saddest story. Some days it was her only story. Maybe she should just fix people in the eye and say, *My brother died in the war*. Or: *My brother was killed*? She's always hated the passive voice, hated the linguistic gymnastics she had to do around the topic of her brother, who was dead, and it had nothing to do with just causes. He didn't die in the war, he died during the war. And that's as close as Tracey will ever get to telling Connie the truth.

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After 9/11, Geoff Knox marched up to Lake Superior State University to the fold-out desk. The Army recruiter had been a bemused bruiser who, learning he had an eager fourteen-year-old kid on his hands, didn't change much about his pitch. Geoff didn't tell the recruiter about his big sister Tracey, who was living in New York when it happened. The desk was busy that September.

The Soho firm had been Tracey's first job after architecture school. She'd landed a position with an architecture firm in the city and had been downtown when the planes struck the towers. She got to the eighth-floor window just in time to see the fireball roar through the second tower. Through glass she watched the haggard red stripes of flame rip the steel beams

and the confetti of paper and debris that had fluttered out of the twin towers from gaping black maws. She called home, unable to get through till almost midnight, called that night and every night after to talk to their mom and Geoff, trying to describe the scene. What does she remember? The smoke, mostly. There was the smoke, first the black plumes and then the blanket of white ash and then the nauseating waves of air for days after, the rank stink of rent steel and rotting flesh.

As for New York? Vigilance—that was the word on the street. That was the order. Be vigilant. But what did it mean to be vigilant? *Semper Vigilans*. You'd better know, because you were supposed to be it at all times. If you see something, say something. The city's nervous system ran on a code. Orange alert. Red alert. Tracey played into the system like the compliant citizen she was trained to be, reduced to stimulus/response. Tracey tried with the subway but she couldn't be underground. She started taking buses. Goddamn buses. They were inefficient and made her late. But she had to see the world through windows, had to be near the yellow tape so she could press it at the first sign of mayhem and get the fuck out.

The American flag hung in every window. Stars and stripes stabbed into every lapel. Passing strangers on street corners, or sharing an stuffy elevator ride, Tracey looked into their eyes and asked them with her eyes, *If I look at you, if I show you my humanity right now, can I stop you from blowing yourself up? Or: If this top floor gets blown to kingdom come, will you hold hands with me?* She looked down at a stranger's hand and pictured its entangled with her own. She pictured their two hands, severed, fingers entwined, lying on a pile of smoking wreckage. She saw the first responders finding their mutilated remains, heard the heavy goods vehicle carting off the load to Fresh Kills, all in the time it took an elevator to climb four floors and the stranger to scratch his nose.

There'd been the thing with the shoe bombs and the nitroglycerin. There'd been the anthrax letters. Investigating, Tracey learned the word *cutaneous*. Cutaneous, subcutaneous, airborne: it could get you any of those ways. Weeks of tension and indigestion. Ash and aftermath. Couldn't look at headlines. While Tracey Knox was commuting to work in Soho and coming home to hide in her Tribeca basement bunker, workers ten blocks south were down there shoveling through the rubble. Firemen, policemen, EMTs, contractors and volunteers, picking through smoking wreckage. Deadly particles seeping into skin, latching onto lungs. Outside the Century 21, finding actual human remains. But then somehow, over time, the terror here was wrapped up, boxed, and shunted back to its place over there. Till Ground Zero became just another construction site. Till the whole thing just deteriorated into a cycle of hearsay and fear-whispers and rumors—a ticker tape terror feeding the twenty-four-hour newsroom beast. Till the rumor of war had hardened into the certainty of war. A war that, fifteen years on, would know no end.

There's a longer history than the story she tells herself. But she still thinks back to that blue-sky morning. The day when, fresh out of Harvard, from the eighth floor of the architectural firm, she watched the towers burn.

Maybe Tracey feels at fault for the stories she has told. But the truth is, it didn't matter at all what she had or hadn't said all those years ago. All he had to be was an American citizen, clap eyes on those collapsing towers, and his mind would be made up. He would want to do something for his country. For his sister. For all the usual words. Freedom. Terror. These are laden words. Tracey doesn't get them, didn't then and doesn't now. She understands form and function, angles and AutoCAD, blueprints and markups. Geoff hadn't seen the things she saw. He lived in a different aftermath. For a while, he put off enlisting. There was that degree he'd decided he wanted after all. He was so close to not being a

part of it. That scholarship, Tracey thought, had saved him. But through four years of university, through a trail of tailgates and chemistry lectures and test prep on Red Bull and Adderall, he never forgot the towers. After all, Geoff Knox went off to war.

*

The third tour was to be the last. It is three years since Tracey stood in that moon-drenched kitchen and heard the story of Geoff's death, and she can't shake that phone call. Elyssa—it's always Elyssa who's the first to know everything—calls to tell her sister the news.

So it's happened at last. Their brother has died in Afghanistan. The first thing Tracey thinks when she get the news is that it's not Geoff who's died. She doesn't think of her brother dying in Afghanistan. She can't. She thinks of her brother, alive, in Michigan. She thinks of him back from basic training, planting green plastic army men on the Christmas tree for hide-and-seek the way they used to do as kids. The sniper was always the hardest to find, laying low in the bristles and garland, aiming his plastic gun at this ornament or that: the macaroni candy cane, the cradle in the manger. Or she thinks of her brother with skinned knees and gap teeth, climbing the crabapple tree in their old backyard. Or maybe she's remembering how he was the last time she saw him, at home on the couch at Thanksgiving, lean and muscled and laconic, eyes glazed after his second tour, dream-weaving his way through Call of Duty while she was trying to talk to him, you know, actually *talk* to him about his deployment. But she's hard-wired against accepting such bullshit, that her brother would actually go to Afghanistan and get himself killed, of all things.

All evidence to the contrary—in four days she'll be carrying that urn—and she refuses to believe Geoff's mortal. Won't buy that it's her little brother who died in the war. She's going

to watch him get hitched to some cute, fake-tanned Michigan chick and raise a crop of cornfed kids. He'll settle down in some government job, spend his weekends with his buddies at the Joe watching the Red Wings lose, eat red meat and wipe his ass with *Foreign Affairs*. Such news—her brother dying in Afghanistan—doesn't register. And as Elyssa keeps talking, the details really don't line up. In this story, there are no notifying officers, no Army chaplain. There are ER doctors and paramedics. She distinctly hears the word *Detroit*.

And so when it turns out that her brother dies but it's not in Afghanistan, that Geoff never went back on that last tour like he said he was going to, when it turns out her brother dies less than a mile down the road from DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital, that he's died all right, but it's in a squat with festering walls and peeling linoleum floors, when it happens that Geoff's been kicked out of the Army and OD'ed on oxycodone, Tracey tries to piece together the unbelievable story she's hearing with the scenario she didn't even know to imagine. And none of it makes sense.

Tracey books the flights from JFK to Toronto, Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie, pronto. She pays way too much for the tickets but what is she going to do, it's her brother's funeral. She flies back to Sault Ste. Marie with Niels, who is Dutch and has never been to an American funeral before.

One day after the phone call, just before she flies home for the funeral, Tracey meets up with Danny, Geoff's war buddy, and gets a debriefing in a Queens sports bar en route to the airport. Tracey rings Danny on their way to JFK because he's local and he'd once given her his number and said, *If you ever need anything, give me a ring*. The place reeks of Windex and buffalo wings. Tracey and Niels sit next to Danny at the sticky bar under flickering screens. They bear hug and order a round.

"You didn't know about Geoff's TBI?"

Danny blinks at Tracey, then at Niels, dipping a wing in sauce and gnawing chicken from the bone. Know about it? Tracey doesn't even know what the letters mean. Danny has to spell it out for her. Traumatic Brain Injury.

"Is that like PTSD?" she asks, timid. It's hard to make herself heard over the din of the bar and the Eagles-Patriots game.

Danny talks, gesturing to his temple with the chicken bone. "After the blast. He was bleeding from the ears, man. It scrambled his brains. He was all messed up. They had to send him off to the unit."

Tracey doesn't get it. Danny washes down the gnawed meat with a Rolling Rock and tells all. Things that didn't make sense before start to make sense. Geoff's fuzzy details about the last deployment. Her letter, stamped *Return to Sender*. And the discharge, unearned in Danny's humble opinion, of Other Than Honorable. Tracey feels her face flush. She hasn't touched her Jack and Coke. Danny, wide eyed, looks from Tracey to Niels, Niels back to Tracey.

"You don't know he spent that time on a wounded warrior unit?"

"Geoff's Humvee *got hit with an IED* and he didn't tell you?"

Well, and what if he didn't? That was always Geoff's way. If he was sick, he wouldn't admit it. Wanted to take care of himself, always did, didn't cry even when he was six and Tracey, who'd more or less brought him up, went off to college. And here's the big sister, not one but two higher degrees. Graduates from Michigan with honors, goes off to Harvard and can't tell when her own brother is lying about his last deployment. But why would Geoff do that that to her, to all of them? Who had he been trying to save?

Trace feels sick so they leave the bar early. They hail a cab on the parkway to take them to the airport. Niels loads her

luggage in the trunk. Tracey's eyes are hot with rage. The driver rollercoasters them to the terminal, and all Tracey can think about is their mom. Geoff's not going to have the military burial, that's one thing. Their mom had been hysterical about him going off to war in the first place, said she had a premonition. Now the premonition's come true, so good luck with that anxiety disorder. At JFK Tracey pushes her purse down the conveyer belt, is patted down by TSA, goes with Niels to the gate. There's that sense of being cheated. There's that Other Than Honorable. The discharge hung Geoff out to dry, now it's going to leave their mom without any benefits. Mom's on disability, their stepdad's a barely functioning alcoholic, and their dad, their real dad, oblivious in Grand Rapids with his new wife, will be no help at all. Remember when their mom was a successful marine biologist? Remember when Geoff was still alive? Tracey does. That life. What is it now but history?

At the gate, Tracey goes online to find out what's she's missing. She learns a lot of really awful vocabulary in the process, like the word *repatriate*, but she does gain some intel. It turns out when you take the whole foreign war component out of it the whole thing can be over and done in a lot faster than you imagine. The body didn't die in Afghanistan, so it doesn't have to be repatriated, it doesn't have to be flown into Dover on a military plane. A quick trip in a fast ambulance to the ER of DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital doesn't cost as much, and it's much quicker. You can place a notice in the paper days later of the general death and keep details quiet. All you have to say is "in a private ceremony" and everyone has to respect that. They won't ask, you don't tell. Except when it's your best friend involved, and you happen to lob her a fib. Then it gets complicated.

He wished to be cremated, so they honored his wishes.

She'd been distraught at the sight of the urn. Who wouldn't be? She'd always imagined it as an elegant container, a silver

goblet with a name engraved, displayed on a mantelpiece. This, though, was decidedly not that. This had been an industrial plastic tub stamped on one side *Detroit Crematorium* in an inelegant sans serif. The plastic lid screwed on and off. It looked like it held weed killer.

There'd been debate after the ceremony about what to do with the ashes. This was the Knoxes. Of course there was debate. The whole thing was ghoulish, Geoff's body stashed into a Ziploc in the *Detroit Crematorium* tub, but Tracey had wanted to give him the honors he deserved. And so the day before she'd flown back to New York, Tracey had unscrewed the lid and made off with a scoop of her brother's ashes. Is this the story she is supposed to be telling Connie over room service mocktails?

Because there's the story Tracey told Constance, the story she'd told all her friends. The one about the military burial, about Geoff dying in the goddamn war. And here is Tracey Knox, anniversary number three, stationed for two days in hallowed DC. From the Hampton Inn, Tracey Google Maps the directions: 2.3 miles from that cemetery. That great green ground of tended graves. She ought to do something. She ought to lay it to rest.

*

It's bone-chill weather, mid-November. Week before Thanksgiving. Tracey is stalking the grounds near Washington Mall alone. She gets to thinking about monuments. You can't avoid it. Here, Lincoln parked in an armchair on that grand staircase. There, that obscene obelisk, rising up out of the ground like Mother Earth with a concrete hard-on. Tracey takes it in, drinking coffee from a to-go cup, her hands in mittens. A couple of people with clipboards and smiles, college kids, come at Tracey on the curvilinear walkway wrapped in bright red smocks that say *Save the Children*. Tracey dodges them, staring at her feet as she hurries past. Does she have a few

minutes today for saving children? It would seem not. She cannot save children. She couldn't even take care of her little brother, the one child that had ever been entrusted to her. She let him go into that war. Is the people in the red smocks' plan to not let the children go fight wars in foreign countries? Because maybe she'd have a few minutes for that.

Tracey pitches her coffee in the trash and keeps walking, hands in her pockets. There's the packet of ash in her right pocket. She feels its uneven lumps through her mittens. She thinks maybe she'll find another Knox, a namesake, and scatter the dust there. But so far, no Knoxes, and the mission's making her sweat.

Tracey dreams, as she walks, about designing a monument for Geoff. Or no, monument isn't the right word. A memorial. She thinks back to her architecture school days and calls up a quote from Lewis Mumford. "The more shaky the institution, the more solid the monument." So, a memorial then. She can imagine it. There's a field lit in a haze. Lemon-colored light. Reeds and grass and stems. There's a crop of pink and red poppies, swaying and bending. She'd call it "The Poppy Field." It would be a vast stretch of land designed so you could walk through it. No sign would tell you not to touch the flowers or not to step certain places. You could press the velvet-soft petals of the poppies to your cheek. Or you could stand in the middle of the field and let the wind blow through your hair. You could breathe in the scent of earth, of sweet prairie grass and Queen Anne's lace. There would be no bodies buried underground. There would be no bodies at all, no ash, and no plaque to tell you what to think about. No why, no when, no who.

What can she say about the evenly spaced rows, the dignified engravings, the markers of moral purpose and patriotism? She can only wonder: Where is my brother? Where was I for him? She is insurgent milling through the manicured lawns. As she walks, she thinks about the memorial she wants to design, the

one with the poppy field, and thinks it shouldn't be called "The Poppy Field." It should be called "Old Wounds."

Tracey hadn't meant to tell Constance, those years ago, an untrue story about her brother's death. It had started as a story Tracey was telling to herself, a story she could use to comfort herself with, a story that he had died for a just cause. She wasn't thinking when she typed it into a screen and hit send, and then the whole story had gotten out of hand. Tracey doesn't know how to say it. That she never flew to DC for the funeral. That there had been no honors, no gun salute. That they'd scattered most of her brother's ashes in Chippewa County into the St. Marys River between Michigan and Canada. All Tracey knows is, she didn't tell the real story right away, and at some point—who knows when?—it had become too late. Connie, who has planned the whole weekend, has carved out a grave-shaped space into Sunday, assuming Tracey will want to use the time to visit her brother's grave in Arlington National Cemetery. And who is Tracey to say that Geoff is not buried there?

That morning, Connie had asked if Tracey wanted company when she went to visit "the grave." Now, coming back into the hotel room, cheeks flushed from the cold, it's all Tracey can do is turn to her best friend and say, "Geoff's not here, Connie." It's her attempt to come clean, and Connie misses it entirely. She thinks Tracey is being figurative, that it's something spiritual. So close to telling the truth, Tracey lets the confession drop. She hangs her coat from the plywood hanger where it swings, the packet of ash still sitting in her right coat pocket.

That night, Tracey crawls into the hard bed and snaps on the bedside light. She takes it out of its drawer, the little green Gideon's Bible. But all she's thinking about as she rifles through the tissue-thin pages is Geoff's copy of *The Art of War* and how she'd claimed it as her own. Geoff's secondhand paperback copy, underlined and dog-eared, is the

closest she's come to his idea of a theology. The book's not with her. She hears Connie's breathing deepen. Tracey puts down Gideon and opens her laptop. She opens a browser tab and searches Geoff's username until she finds what she's looking for. No graphics, no explosions, just a careful set of instructions. She reads through the list for "Suffer with Me."

Throw a knife at the guard at the post.

Spam the FIRE button when Woods climbs to the first guard post.

Survive enemy RPG blast which causes collateral damage (to buildings).

Her tasks, here, are clear. Destroy enemy chopper with mortar round. Destroy tank with anti-tank mine. Her eye scrolls down to the last lines.

Kill 8 enemies in the clinic.

Collect all Intel.

Do not die.

From *The Art of War* to Call of Duty, military theory boiled down to one order: Do not die.

And if you do?

Tracey dips her head, plugs in the headphones, goes back down into the Black Ops forest.

*

"All Hunter victors, this is Sergeant Foley. Prepare to engage. We're taking sniper fire from multiple directions."

"Prepare to engage, we're going in! Spin it up!"

The screen is flecked with blurs and drops of crimson. It's an

ambush. She moves forward but with difficulty. The explosions now have ceased to be controlled, now she surges forward with a deep nausea through the exploding mortar and shrapnel. Tracey hears the breath of the soldier come in hard, heavy bursts, so intense she can't tell if it's the soldier breathing or if it's her. A message flashes on the screen: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." The hands in front of her, her hands, Geoff's hands, stay set on the gun as they stumble deliriously through the wreckage.

They are under sniper fire. She sees clothes and rags draped on a clothes line, a banner on which something is written in Arabic. Her head jars with every lurch. It feels like she is under fire from the very infrastructure. Her hands don't leave the rifle. She falls into an alley between a chain-link fence and a corrugated steel shed. The sky is a smudge of smoke and rifle fire, the tracers of bullets garlanding the background. It feels like being drunk, stumbling to find a doorway she cannot find. Gunfire goes off but it's a muted spray. She can hear Sergeant Foley screaming directions through a walkie-talkie but she can't move her mouth to answer. Breathe. Breathe. The message flashes again, small, insistent: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." Geoff does not get to cover. Tracey is spinning with him, stumbling each inch forward. She cannot rescue him, cannot get him to cover. The screen is streaked with fog, her eyes stung with shattered glass, drops of crimson, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—

"Trace."

Tracers, rocket launchers. Connie is saying her name. How long has she been saying it? How long has Tracey been holed up in this hotel room in DC with her pregnant friend? There is nowhere to go. Her neck is clammy with sweat, her heartbeat going like mad, its pulse wild and lone and unmeasured. The screen is flashing but the sound no longer fills her ears. A desert stretches up to her feet, all the way up to the dull upholstery of the olive-colored couch, the beige wallpaper,

the styrofoam coffee cups. Her hands, shaking. It would be so easy to snap the laptop shut, but she can't bring her hands to do it. She's still waiting for orders.

Photo Credit: [the yes man](#)