One Saturday morning in May, Michael walked into the garage to find a magnetic yellow ribbon affixed to the tail of the Honda. For a moment he regarded the loop, its bottom ends crossing in the pantomime of a fishtail, as a person might examine a dent delivered by a runaway shopping cart. After touching it experimentally with his fingertips he decided to leave the magnet on for his errands in town. It made him part of the crowd in Northrup, New York, where many vehicles were bedecked with ribbons and flags, but nonetheless Michael felt self-consciousness as he traveled from the post office to the bank to the Citgo to fill a gas can for the lawnmower. It was as if he were walking around with a sign reading KICK ME!

taped on his back. As soon as he returned home he asked Elizabeth where she'd gotten the magnetic ribbon.

"Axtell's," she said, naming the local hardware store. She sat at the kitchen table, arranging peonies she had clipped from the bushes in the backyard. Her long hair was pulled through the back of an old Expos cap. "That okay with you?"

"I thought we didn't put things on our car," Michael said carefully. They'd once had a discussion about the semiotics of bumper-stickers, the shrillness and desperation of EAT ORGANIC! or CHARLTON HESTON IS MY PRESIDENT, and especially the pathetic misfortune of being unable to remove the name of a candidate who, though admirable, had been slaughtered. It was fatalistic, that kind of loyalty, Elizabeth had said, and a little trashy besides, like tattooing the name of a month-old boyfriend on your shoulder blade.

"It's not permanent," she said without looking up. "It's a magnet."

"That's true," Michael agreed, trailing off, trying to find a new

line of reasoning.

"We may not like the guys in charge." Elizabeth looked at him hard. "But guys like Trev are just doing their jobs. Don't you think that's important to remember?"

"You're right," Michael said, rebuffed. "It is."

It began a month ago, when Michael found her sitting at the desk in the study where they kept the computer, distraught. He thought maybe one of them had overdrawn the checking account. Speaking quietly, Elizabeth told him it was Trev Donnelly, a friend of hers from college who had paid his tuition through the ROTC program. For the last two years he had been stationed in Germany, where he worked with a team—platoon-division. Michael didn't know the right term for soldiers who maintained the vehicles. Trev included Elizabeth on a list of friends and family to whom he e-mailed brief updates every few weeks. He talked about his eagerness to leave the military, how the Germans acted deliberately rude to him when he wore his uniform off-base, but at least he was completely safe, even

comfortable. He had bought himself a Porsche in Stuttgart and spent his leave-time blasting across the Autobahn, visiting auto factories and breweries. He had a girlfriend in the States named Gina. He brought her over to Germany a few times a year. Now Trev had received his orders; his group was leaving for the Middle East.

"He'll be fine," Michael had said, sitting down beside Elizabeth. "Doing what he does, he'll be stationed well behind the lines."

For a few moments Elizabeth sat in a silence Michael had come to recognize well: it meant she had made up her mind to be worried, and he could not comfort her. "There aren't any front and rear line in this war, Mike. And the military seems to be making things up as they go along."

Since their wedding three years ago they had been living on New York's uppermost border with Canada. Michael worked for a small college where he maintained the computers; Elizabeth was a research librarian. They did not have a television, so they gathered their news from the radio: NPR and also the CBC, whose signal

strayed over the border and whose accounts of the war seemed much more honest and frightening. In the evening, they sometimes listened to speeches and reports that left Michael picturing the Middle East as a humming hive of violence. Elizabeth's brown eyes turned sad and she sighed, as if to say, So the world is that much bigger than us after all.

"He'll be home in seven months," Michael had said. "That's not too long."

Michael knew from photographs and from what his wife had told him that in college, Trev had been like a brother to her. Blonde and broad-shouldered, Trev looked like he spent his winters chopping wood and his summers bailing hay. He had a round, fleshy face and the bright eyes of a practical joker. Before leaving for Germany he had sold his black Camaro, in which he had probably given Elizabeth rides. Once, rolling her eyes, she described Trev as a redneck playboy. Not her type, not studious enough. Had a maturity problem. She meant to assure Michael that she hadn't fallen in love with Trev, but Michael wondered if she had

in fact fallen in love with him, even for a little while, and hadn't admitted it. He wondered also if Trev had loved her. Since the news of his deployment Michael wanted her to take her name off Trev's e-mail list. Instead of asking he chastised himself for being petty. The man was thousands of miles away, living a life of unpleasantries that Michael could hardly imagine.

That was the spring and summer that songs, maudlin assertions of patriotism and reminders of soldierly sacrifice, filled the country-radio airwaves. In a small town like Northrup, populated by farmers, mechanics, and tradesmen, there was no escaping the songs: Michael heard the twangy aggression and self-righteous pride of the singers, who were always male, in the grocery store, the hardware store, the bank. He thought the songs ridiculous, bad, and even propagandist, as if Nashville and the Pentagon were in cahoots. Elizabeth used to agree, but since Trev's deployment, she took an embarrassed interest in the songs. Sometimes, driving into the Adirondacks for a hike, a cowboy

came on and sang a tribute to American soldiers, or, worse, a ballad from the point of view of a dead soldier, and the corners of Elizabeth's eyes involuntarily teared up. Michael gripped the wheel with both hands and stared straight ahead at the glare off the hood, trying to give her privacy.

He felt surrounded. The Army kept a base only eighty miles away, and people in Northrup were inclined to hang flags from their living room windows, affix them to their cars, and make their own banners with bed sheets and cans of Krylon: THESE COLORS DON'T RUN; FREEDOM DON'T COME FREE. Since before the war began it had been a relief to drive into Canada for dinner-- as if in crossing the St. Lawrence their wheels came down on more rational, reasonable ground. The Canadians were a proud people, always flying flags and affixing maple leaves to everything, but Michael wasn't at all bothered. Perhaps it was the lack of sheer stupidity in their expression, the demure politeness, even dullness, he'd come to ascribe to Canadians (probably incorrectly, he knew). But six months of winter, he said to the

other technicians on campus, could mellow a country out: Look at the Swedes, and the Finns. You never heard of them making any trouble. It was cold in Russia, but the Russians were different somehow. Michael put the joking away when he came home. He knew Elizabeth would be angry to hear the way he talked, and came home feeling as if he had committed some act of infidelity.

He wasn't jealous of her distraction over Trev. He didn't doubt they were happily-married. When he saw her crying beside the radio he knew it was out of fear for a friend, and what he felt instead of jealousy was shame. In a strange way he wished he was over there, deployed. He wondered if Elizabeth, had comparing him and Trev in her mind, had stumbled upon the conclusion that he, Michael, was weak. Not less of a man, because she wasn't the type to think military service made a man a man, but maybe not as strong as Trev, or as brave. Lacking.

She had been raised in a household where these ideas – duty, honor, patriotism – formed central values. Her father was hawkish, an avid listener of

conservative radio shows. He had once said to Michael that all things considered, he thought serving in a war was a pretty good experience (he had never been to war himself, though he had been of the right age and background to be drafted into Vietnam; Michael wondered about that). And Michael had once seen Elizabeth's mother wearing a shirt silk-screened with a picture of an American flag and a whole apple pie. They knew what it meant to be American, the burdens and martyrdom their citizenship demanded, the resultant pride. They had also known Trev, and Michael was sure that they had indulged in some pretty unflattering comparisons; they would have been honored to have a solider-son-in-law. Elizabeth's father, a Baptist and a teetotaler, might even buy him a beer.

I would have gone too.

For weeks Michael wanted to say this to Elizabeth whenever he saw her crying, or when she read a new e-mail out loud to him, or when the radio droned with stories from embedded reporters: more violence, bombings,

the cheapening of human life. He would not have volunteered, as Trev had in going through ROTC, but if told to report he would have gone. If there were a draft. I would do that duty. He carried the words, heavy in his mind, for weeks. I would show valor too.

It seemed an insecure, foolish thing to need to say out loud. Furthermore, Michael thought, he should not have to say it. He should not have to defend himself. More importantly, in his heart, he doubted whether the words were even true.

Once his mother had said that if there were ever a draft, she would send him, her only son, to Canada. He was sixteen; they had been talking about her high-school friends who went to Vietnam; she took his face in her hands for so long he grew uncomfortable. She did not make fleeing to Canada sound like cowardice; instead she seemed to be making an asseveration of life's rich gift. And though she said it only once, her words affected him deeply: whenever Michael tried to imagine himself in Trev's place, he could see no further than the arrival of the letter from the draft board.

He could not imagine what would follow in any detail: getting a physical, being issued equipment, going through basic training, vanishing into the belly of a jet as huge as a whale.

Instead he saw himself living in a small apartment in Ottawa, Ontario, just across the border. Off Dalhousie Street, say, half a mile from Parliament and only a few blocks from the American embassy. The apartment would have hardwood floors and receive good light. It would face a Lebanese bakery. Michael saw himself carrying a coffee in Canada's bitter cold, skating the canal, buying berries and asparagus at the Byward Market when spring arrived. The vividness of this life against the vagueness of war told him that his departure to Canada would naturally come to pass. He loved the world too much to be accessory in his own departure from it. He only regretted that he would have to leave his wife behind, perhaps sneak out in the middle of the night. Elizabeth would never move to Canada with him.

For weeks he carried these ideas on his walks to work, through the quiet streets and across the

campus, empty of students for the summer. When confronted with the question of how he would get back into America when the war ended, Michael was only mildly ashamed to realize that returning did not matter; he could happily live in Canada. Expatriation presented no serious loss that he could see. He supposed he liked his country, but he did not love it. This shamed him too, but not greatly. He removed his hat when the national anthem played at baseball games, as his father had taught him, but he did not sing. He liked the Canadian anthem better, and sometimes, at a hockey game, he sang along with the gentle melody.
But what about a war on American soil, he asked himself? That would be different. Then he would do what he had to do. Deciding this, Michael felt a kind of redemption.

His grandfathers were both veterans of the Second World War. Recently they had died of ailments associated with old age; military honor guards brought an eerie solemnity to their funerals. Sometimes, thinking of war, Michael missed them terribly. It seemed to him that

he could have used their guidance, or simply their stories. About his one grandfather's service, his father's father, he knew next to nothing; apparently he had been a quartermaster in the European Theater, far from the front. He used the GI Bill to get a good education when he returned and became an engineer. Perhaps this is what Don, Michael's father-in-law, had in mind when he said that war could be a good experience. His other grandfather, though, had been deployed in the Pacific, then loaded onto a troop ship bound for Okinawa, an infantryman with orders to storm the island and take it. A few days before the mission he came down with yellow fever. When his unit departed he was still in the infirmary. The Japanese, well-entrenched, decimated the entire platoon. None of his buddies returned. The bout with yellow fever left him weakened, emaciated, and permanently bald, but alive at least. He was given a medical discharge and sent home to New Jersey. This scenario seemed ideal, Michael thought: to answer the call and go, and to be spared at the last minute by something entirely beyond your

control. A legitimate deus ex machina. Summer continued; the tomatoes fattened on the vines behind their house; the days became too hot for hiking; Michael and Elizabeth walked to the river and paddled their canoe or swam, and sometimes they returned to find e-mails from Trev. Two, three per month. Elizabeth read them out loud, and though they were never personal, never mentioned the past she and Trev had shared at college in Ohio, their power over her still bothered Michael. On the days the messages arrived she was silent and restless and would not listen to the radio; in the evenings she had to get out of the house, walk the streets. Michael stayed behind, unable to concentrate either, trying to imagine her responses: I'm praying for you; Take care of yourself; You'll be home soon. The things anyone would say to any soldier at war, and yet Michael felt, illogically, insulted.

Sometimes, in the mornings, the windows open to the birds and the breezes, he ate his breakfast and tried to imagine eating MREs in the desert. He tried to imagine the explosions, a sudden jolt upward into

weightlessness as his truck drove over a bomb, was struck by a mortar. Pierced by light, shredded by a hot, jagged wind. He knew what to picture but couldn't make the picture real.

Trev's death was easier to envision: silence, like static on a radio. How would they know? Sometimes the announcers read the names of the American KIAs, but often they did not. Trev's parents would not have access to his e-mail account; only close family and friends might be invited to the funeral. Instead of news, instead of e-mails, the air around them would freeze, and Elizabeth, and Michael with her, would know only waiting.

Then it was November, and Trev's tour was completed. Perhaps the Army would try to lure him back in, but as far as he was concerned, he said in his last message, which came from Germany, he was finished. He'd had enough. As soon as he returned to the States he and Gina were getting married.

"We should go," Elizabeth said from the study when the message came.

"It's a ten-hour drive,"

Michael reminded her.

"It's the least we can do."

In return for what? Michael wanted to ask, but he knew better.

He found Trev taller and broader and stronger-looking than he remembered from the photographs. To Michael's relief, he wore a suit to the wedding since being honorably discharged. At the reception the DJ presented a slide-show of the bride and groom, including shots of Trev in his military dress, and his fatigues, his blue eyes squinting into the desert glare. In the background the DJ played a popular country song about the bravery of American soldiers; every time the military pictures came on, the guests cheered and hooted.

They danced a little during the party, but Elizabeth was tired, and people she knew from college kept walking up to her for conversation and introductions. He had always been proud of his career, which began in graduate school and continued to cedar college, where he was an administrator, but that night, in the atmosphere of a parade, it seemed a

small, even frivolous thing. At eleven o'clock they drove back to their hotel. A light rain was falling; a familiar smell of wet leaves filled the car. Michael's ears rang from the aftermath of the loud dance music, and he felt an upwelling of desire to say it again: I would have gone too. I just want you to know that. It seems an important thing to say.

He knew, though, that his wife would only dismiss what he said, might squeeze his knee and say he was being silly, she knew he would go, of course he would go, her emphasis underscoring her doubt. And this would only make the awkwardness he felt around her worse. In their hotel room, in bed, he wanted to make love, wanted assurance, but exhausted by the ride and the day, Elizabeth quickly fell asleep.

After the wedding the e-mails stopped coming. The last message Trev sent, which arrived on the night of the first snow in Northrup, had him moving out to Wyoming with Gina, where the both of them found jobs with the National Park Service.

The war continued to enter into Michael and

Elizabeth's living room – by radio, by newspaper – but now the firefights and car-bombings felt impersonal, almost history, a tragedy without a face. Oddly enough, Michael noticed as he shopped in the Big M Market or pumped gas, the country songs which had come in swarms when the war first began slowed to a trickle, as if Nashville had grown bored with the war too. Now the cowboys and pseudo-cowboys sang of small-town pride and Jesus. Elizabeth switched to a jazz station they picked up from Montreal.

One morning, after shoveling the driveway, Michael removed the magnetic ribbon from the trunk of the car. Elizabeth either did not notice, or, if she did notice, did not object. Thoughts of shame and cowardice and patriotism receded from his mind. He did not have reason to speak or think about how he would have fought in the war ever again. His capacity for valor, at least of the soldierly variety, remained forever untested, and this was a relief.

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