

The One Left Behind



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We chat for nearly an hour before Sgt. Devereaux feels comfortable enough to say, “Hey, I’ve got a funny story for you.” I’d been working with soldiers long enough to know their “funny” stories often had a tinge of underlying pain.

“So, yesterday I was walking across the parking lot over at the PX when a car backfired, really, really close. Before I know it, I’m crouched down behind a car in the parking lot, taking cover and looking for incoming rounds. My heart’s pounding and I’m freaking out. I’m crouched low, checking all around, feeling like I’m about to get blasted into nowhere.

“Then I realize, ‘Oh, that’s a car.’ So I stood up and brushed myself off. There was a civilian walking by. She looked at me *really* strangely and said, ‘Are you ok?’ I told her I was fine. But I must have been shaking for the next half hour.”

His chuckle at the end of the story is strained and a little off-key.

“I never know when something like that’s going to happen. I’ve been back almost six years now, and...you know...I still take cover like that.”

He shrugs his shoulders as if it's no big deal, but the look in his eyes has just enough pleading in it to let me know he wonders if he's a little weird, doing something like that.

“What else?” I ask evenly.

“What else what?” Devereaux replies, shifting nervously on his feet. His shoulders are suddenly completely still. Any sense of joking around and telling funny stories has disappeared.

“What else do you do that's like that?”

I keep my voice casual, with a thin veneer of “chatting” in it, but I'm pushing the door open as wide as possible, wanting him to feel free to tell me anything—no matter how weird or embarrassing or confusing.

Devereaux's eyes are suddenly skittish, flickering around. His chest heaves with a big breath, and he blows the air out of his mouth like he's pumping up a life raft.

“Ok. Uhm. I sleep with my gun on my nightstand. I can't sleep if it's not there. I finally got myself to stop keeping it loaded. But the magazine has to be right there next to it. If I wake up in the middle of the night I have to check and make sure it's still there or I feel like I'm going to go crazy.”

He looks over at me to gauge my reaction. I look back at him with pure patience and steadiness. *Tell me the rest*, my look says.

He takes another deep breath.

“Everyone sees me here at work, smiling and happy. They all think I'm fine. Yeah...they...they think I'm fine.”

Since he repeats this, I take it as a clue: *Please don't think I'm fine.*

“I drive a different route to work every day. I can’t shake the feeling that someone might be tracking me, might be gunning for me.”

His words start to tumble out faster now.

“I look over my shoulder all the time. I mean, all the time. I can never relax. I can barely stand to go into stores and I find myself checking the roofs of buildings for snipers. I drive close to the center of the road when it’s not busy so I don’t take a chance on something being hidden near the side. My wife says the church bells near our house are a real soothing sound to wake up to in the middle of the night. But when I wake up, I’m panicked. It’s the only way I ever wake up—so damn terrified, wondering what’s wrong. Like I’m locked and loaded before I’m even awake.

“I never leave the house except to go to work. I just can’t. A buddy invited me over to his house for dinner a couple of weeks ago. I told him I’d come and I *wanted* to go. But when the time came to head over there I just couldn’t do it. I freaked out, had to stay home. I didn’t even call to let him know I wasn’t coming. It’s just too weird.”

I keep nodding, wanting him to just let the words, the stories, the pain spill out freely.

Every part of me, communicating: *Tell me more.*

Devereaux stops for a long time. I can tell there’s a story he doesn’t want to speak. Several more deep breaths come and go. His voice softens and drops into a pained quiet: “You see, over in Iraq there was one kid in my company that I’ll never forget. He was just nineteen, full of life. He had a kind of joyful manner, you know? Skinny black kid from the deep South—real intense Southern. I mean, that kid had a drawl and a half. But so damn full of life.

“He’d gotten into some trouble with the commanders, just being a kid, really. I pulled him aside and talked to him, told him to settle down and let the Army work for him. We talked about him straightening out so he could make a career out of it, have a solid job and a path for himself. God, he was a great kid. He used to get these care packages from home all the time and he’d act like a little kid at Christmas. He’d get so excited and he’d kind of dance all around and show everyone what he got. Goofy, but sweet, you know? We got real close. He was such a great kid and I felt like I was kind of watching out for him.”

Devereaux’s eyes are watery now. His breath is ragged and his voice sounds choked.

“He went out on patrol one day, and he never came back. Roadside bomb just blew his unit’s truck right out from under him. The other guys with him were hurt, but...he was gone. I remember feeling like something in me went dead. Not a kid like that. Not a kid who was funny and goofy and so alive and so goddamn young. It just isn’t right and I could never make sense of anything after that.”

When Devereaux looks up at me next, his eyes have gone flat, as if any bit of coping he’d cobbled together since then had suddenly left him, and he’s now stranded in a searing desert of grief. He shakes his head, keeps looking at me, and can’t continue talking. We stare at each other and let the moments just open up in silence, honoring one soldier gone too soon, and honoring the one left behind.

* All names, ranks and physical descriptions have been changed to protect privacy.

