They Also Serve

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God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
Bear his mildeyoak, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite.
—John Milton

At nearly one in the morning, the plane carrying my son back to the safety of the United States appeared as a fast-moving star in the sky, far in the distance from Pope Army Airfield. Being a newbie Army mom, I didn't know what to look for and recognized only the rapidly glowing, white spot of light when one of the more experienced Army parents pointed it out.

It was, however, not a time for joy. I had breath-holding to do. Acknowledging the worst and praying for the best had been my reality for over half a year. I had horrible images of mangled limbs, burned flesh, and flag-covered coffins that I carried with me throughout this deployment. Thank God those had not come to be my reality. But the images remained in the recesses of my mind, like The Ghost of What

Could Have Been Had God Not Been Merciful. Or perhaps The Ghost of What Would Have Been Had I Not Been Lucky. Although I had prayed to God harder than I ever had in my life, it is hard to believe His mercy saved my son when other mothers' sons came home in boxes. While I am grateful my son was spared, I wept for the other families and their unimaginable loss. There is even still so much I do not understand about the workings of life, and death, and God.

Standing at the end of the runway and watching the spot transform into an aircraft, I tried to feel relief. My son was on that plane and he had made it home. Bud's seven months in Afghanistan hadn't resulted in any physical injuries beyond bad blisters caused by ill-fitting boots. But the plane wasn't on the ground yet. Although I had never heard of a military plane crashing while delivering its living cargo back home, it was possible. I had already spent the last seven months holding my breath–taking nothing for granted. Each Facebook post and phone call soaked up, relished, memorized, and relayed to friends and family who patiently listened to trivial stories of things like beef jerky and auto magazines, contrasted with the deadly seriousness of a green on blue attack within my son's compound his second month in country.

As many dark images still lived inside me, it was not hard to imagine this plane–the one bearing my son back to safety–careening off the end of the runway, or bursting into flames midair. Instead, it set down gently on the runway and taxied to a stop about one hundred yards away from the rope line filled with cheering family who had once been left behind, but no longer were. We held signs that couldn't be read in the darkness and cameras that couldn't be used without

violating military orders. And we waited. The door of the plane opened and some unidentified military dignitaries climbed the stairs to that door and went in.

And we waited. I became conscious of how much my feet hurt and how foggy my brain was. Sleep deprivation from a 24-hour car ride from Wisconsin was starting to catch up with me.

And we waited. We became aware of movement as a small group made their way from the building behind us and down a ramp towards the air field. Two young men with military demeanor and civilian clothing walked alongside a couple soldiers in uniform on crutches and one in a wheelchair being pushed by a well-dressed woman. The sudden hush of the crowd interrupted only by a couple of tearful gasps highlighted the solemnity of the occasion. Watching this impromptu parade, it slowly became apparent what the participants had in common: each was sporting at least one new limb. The first ones down the ramp evidently had also been the first ones injured—and the first ones recuperated. That is, if "recuperated" is the right word when an IED rips a part of your body off and you now walk on metal where flesh used to be.

The band seated far in the back of the fluorescent-lit building struck up some familiar patriotic tune that my brain failed to record. Movement at the door of the aircraft resulted in a stream of camouflage and maroon airborne berets down the stairs and onto the red carpet at the end of the ramp. The crowd was abuzz with whispers of "Is that him?" I was reminded of that old motherly adage "I would know my child anywhere" and how false it is. Staring in vain with my middle-aged eyes, I tried to pick Bud out of the orderly lineup. I was

again struck by how much alike these young men all look. This wasn't the first time I struggled this way. Throughout deployment, I thought I recognized Bud in every Facebook photo from Afghanistan. The matching uniforms didn't help, of course. But it was more than that. It was the identical swagger and American defiance that radiated through each shot. It was this phenomenon of misidentification that caused me to frequently say, "They are *all* our sons."

The troops stood on that red carpet for what seemed like forever while the band continued to play a medley of patriotic tunes. But then, as if in unspoken accord, the entire crowd filed into the building ahead of the soldiers.

And we waited. They finally marched in, military composure and precision intact. Some Army officer spoke to the crowd, which wasn't listening. Scanning the rows of soldiers staring straight ahead, I recognized my son – or at least I believed I had. After all the months of misidentifications online, I was hesitant to trust my instincts. So I positioned myself squarely in front of my mark and smiled. A quick, unauthorized grin was returned before the face became stoic again, and I knew I had found my Bud.

Nearly as soon as I found him, however, I lost him. As the soldiers were dismissed, the crowd erupted into chaos. Surrounded by kissing couples and dazed children now up hours past their bedtimes, I became disoriented. I hadn't moved more than two feet from my original spot, yet the entire crowd seemed to have shifted around me. Finally, I saw Bud in a manly clinch with his father. Bud flashed a conciliatory smile as he assumed he was in trouble for not finding his mom first. I wasn't upset. Soon enough, I had my turn hugging my

boy. I was struck by a couple things. First, he felt so solid. My son who had played high school football and was on the swim team came home from war far more muscular than when he left. Likely this was attributable to the heavy radio equipment he hauled around as part of his MOS.

But the thing that stood out for me the most was my own response. This moment that I had played out in my head every night before I went to sleep should have been very familiar to me, yet I didn't recognize it. In my mental rehearsals, I sobbed and nearly collapsed from relief every time I pictured my son getting off that plane. In my mental rehearsals, my joy was so overwhelming that it couldn't be contained. And yet, here my son was in front of me, and he was smiling, and I was smiling, and I was genuinely, truly happy. But the happiness didn't come with that great gush of relief that I was expecting. Maybe it was because in my mental rehearsals, my son wasn't wearing a weapon. And yet, as I held him in my arms, there was a rifle between us–still hanging around his neck.

I wasn't afraid of the gun. I didn't think it was going to go off as I held my son. It had the strongest industrial-strength garbage tie I had ever seen wrapped through and nullifying the trigger. At some level, I wasn't even surprised that he and all his fellow soldiers still had them. But perhaps its very presence was preventing me from doing what I had planned and hoped for. I wanted to be able to stand down. I wanted proof that this tour of duty was over—that I could, at least for a little bit, stop being an Army mom and simply be Bud's mom.

Suddenly, a shout rang out in the room, and Bud gave me another apologetic smile. He told me that he needed to go turn in his weapon

and some of his gear, then he wanted to put the rest of his things away in his newly assigned room, and that everything should take about an hour and a half. The soldiers were loaded onto a fleet of white buses parked just outside in the circle drive. I was struck by the age of these vehicles, so much, much older than any of the human cargo they carried routinely between the base and the airfield and back again.

As I walked past the line of buses, breathing in thick wafts of exhaust, I thought about these vehicles and their cargo. With every trip the buses took back to the base, there were fewer soldiers than had been on the original trips to the plane seven months before. There were deaths and injuries accounting for empty seats that night. Just the thought brought that familiar tightness to my throat. I had felt it every day for seven months–striking me in the post office, grocery store, work, church, shower… In the powerful presence of these buses, I shouldn't have expected any difference.

The memory of the rest of that night–or more accurately "morning"–is a blur. The estimate of one-and-a-half hours was off by three hours, something that I have come to expect from military maneuvers of any type. My husband and I watched the troops unload luggage, move things seemingly from one pile to the next–and then back again to the first. There was much standing around and waiting, which seemed normal to the soldiers and agonizingly slow to the families. I watched the wives and girlfriends, who had started out the evening glamorous and sultry, wilt as they stood on their high heels hour after hour, their once well-coiffed hair hanging rebelliously around their faces. Seeing their exhausted attempts to retain what was left of their elegance made me grateful that I was an Army mom

instead of a sweetheart. I didn't have to be beautiful or glamorous. I just had to be me–the embodiment of home and childhood and simpler times. The Army wives and girlfriends around me smelled of expensive perfumes. I likely still smelled of the cookies I had baked in the hotel kitchenette earlier in the day.

By the time we got back to that hotel room, it was nearly 4 a.m. I was intoxicated by fatigue, aware that my speech was somewhat slurred and slow. I watched with what attention I could muster as my son opened a variety of gifts that had been carefully laid out for his return. It seemed like just moments later that I was making a bed for him on the hotel room's couch. Minutes later, I was asleep.

I awoke after a few hours and quietly made my way to the living room. I sat at the computer desk and watched my youngest child sleep. I marveled how that 19-year-old body stretched out on the couch in front of me had been halfway around the world roughly a day before. That he had lived in a land that I had felt in my soul but had never seen. That his mind contained images and events of that place–and that I may never know what really happened to him. I wondered if he would struggle with PTSD–a condition that can rob soldiers of who they once had been. A condition that had the power, if it struck him, to turn my son into someone I wouldn't know.

Suddenly, Bud began to stretch and stir. His right fist went up to his eye and rubbed it vigorously. I couldn't help but smile. He had done that the day he was born–and every day thereafter when he was tired. It was comforting to know that this little signal hadn't changed. He asked me if I had been watching him sleep. I said yes, and was answered with a simple grunt of acknowledgement—far more

enthusiastic than the teenage sarcasm I had braced myself for. I was allowed to slide next to him on the couch and rub the top of his head. His military buzz cut felt prickly under my fingertips, as it had for most of his life. Minus a rebellious streak of long hair expressly forbidden by the Christian school he attended, Bud had always preferred a crew cut. Throughout the weekend, I tried as much as possible to control the impulse to touch him. I loved feeling his solidness, his absolute assuredness of being, confirming what my senses had been trying to tell me–that my boy had really, truly come back.

Our time together was a blur of errand running, shopping, and unpacking. I spent far more than the household budget could withstand, but each purchase was so easy to justify. Bud came home, so now I would buy him a cartload of housekeeping supplies. Bud came home with both legs intact, and he wanted a new pair of boots, identical to the ones his cranky sergeant wore, so he knew he wouldn't get yelled at for having them. I would show my gratitude by purchasing those boots. Bud seemed to be his old self so far, so I would celebrate by taking him shopping at his favorite clothing store chain that offers a combination of urban chic and skateboard punk. I have never understood that store or his fascination with it, but I would plunk down money in celebration of his return. There are a lot of moms who weren't so lucky.

It's been nearly four months since that whirlwind trip to greet my son. In some ways, life is back to normal. Bud has settled into a routine with his amazing roommate, has fun showing off his 21-year-old sports car purchased with the money he had saved up over

deployment, and is making plans for going to school when his military contract is over in three years. I am teaching and making time for writing projects like this one.

But in another sense, life is not back to normal. Life is not okay. I am not okay. In many ways, Bud is home from Afghanistan, but I am not. I went to war and I didn't come back. How crazy that must sound. I never left U.S. soil. At least my body didn't. But I can tell you that an integral part of me went to Afghanistan, a land I did not see, smell, or hear. My only son went to war and I couldn't let him go by himself. So I packaged up his mother and sent her in care packages–in homemade cookies and car magazines with quippy Post-it Note comments throughout, in five-page letters, Facebook conversations, and phone calls with crappy connections. So much of me was there, desperately trying to protect him from something I didn't understand. I didn't know why he was there, what he was doing while he was there–or when or even if he would ever come home again.

To live with the specter of what could happen, I learned during those seven months to dampen my emotions. I couldn't stop the fear, the anger, or the sadness. But I could turn myself down, like an old-time radio with a giant dial. I muffled myself and all the bad feelings that had become synonymous with being me.

Although Bud is home now, I still feel missing and muffled. I have a hard time feeling joy because joy–that lightness of being–can only result from throwing wide open the windows of your soul. And if the windows are open that wide, other things can come in, too–the dark, the scary, the terrifying "what-if's" and "we're not out of the woods yet." I can't trust myself or life or the Army enough to open the

windows wide. Just today, my son told me he is thinking of volunteering for the next deployment. And so I go through my days, not entirely here. Large chunks of me are missing–and until they come home, I think I am going to continue to feel lost.

I hesitate to say these things because people might misconstrue that I think I had it harder than others did. And that's the point. I know Bud and his fellow soldiers were the ones who really suffered–worked in freezing cold and sweltering heat, were shot at, and saw unspeakable things. Of the soldiers who went, Bud is lucky because he came home without any serious physical injuries. And of the moms who "went"–who packaged up parts of their souls and shipped them off to Afghanistan–I am a lucky one because my boy came home. That day that I had waited and prayed for actually happened.

Maybe that's where the real horror lies–you know how much you struggled with Afghanistan, and that there is always someone who had it worse than you did. So much, much worse. So you close that window even more tightly than it was closed before. Try to keep those "what ifs" and "could have beens" at bay.

Parts of me are still in Afghanistan. Or perhaps more accurately, parts of that country that I never saw, smelled, or heard are still inside me. As time goes on, I hope those parts of Afghanistan will be able to let me go, so I can open my windows wide again. It just might be a beautiful day.


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