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Wide Open: a Collection

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By

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For my mother and father, Suzann and Wayne Belk,
and for Brandon Presley

Cameron Belk
June 2011

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This thesis is a collection of essays focused on family, love, death, discovery and understanding. Each essay is independent. However, the sequence deepens the intention of the collection. Although they are not in chronological order, there is a movement through place or space. All events are true and are written how I perceived them.

Learning the Truth

I lied for the first time in public. When my best friend, Brooke Carmichael, got a brand new go-kart for her eighth birthday, I was jealous because I wanted it for myself. She invited the entire class to spend the night at her house, and as soon as our mothers pulled out of sight, we stood staring at her shining, red set of wheels. Of course, we all wanted to take it for a ride, but not all of us were able to drive. “Only the experienced can drive,” Mrs. Carmichael said.

I considered myself capable of driving, although I had never driven one before or anything motorized for that matter. Her mother stood over us with serious eyes and asked, “Raise your hand if you’ve driven a go-kart more than once.” I immediately threw mine in the air and looked over my shoulder to see whose hands were up. There were only a few. I thought I could get away with lying.

I did not. And my parents made sure I wouldn’t forget my punishment. Every Saturday for two months, they dropped me off at my grandfather’s house down the street. My job was shucking peas and corn and pulling weeds out of Papa Belk’s garden. Being eight years old, I despised working in the garden, but after several Saturdays, I learned a lot about growing crops. I was beginning to like being a gardener.

I pretended to plant seeds for the Indians and shuck corn for our Thanksgiving meal. Papa Belk sat on a five gallon bucket across from me and said, “We can plant seeds for the Indians and shuck corn for a big meal,” and he wiped his hands along his jean overalls, “but if you tell me a lie, I’ll throw you over yonder, and you’ll sink into the bottom of the earth.”

He pointed at a blanket of kudzu. It's a pesty plant used for erosion control, and I had no desire to go under it. I stared at him wide-eyed; sure the old man was about to throw me to my death. He and the kudzu reminded me how I had gotten myself into the garden in the first place.

At the birthday party, Mrs. Carmichael decided I would be a driver and after several pairs of squealing girls wheeled around the yard in freedom, it was my turn to take the driver's seat. My passenger had been chosen: Missy Pitcock, a quiet city girl, with long brown hair and a timid smile. She climbed into her seat and tightened her helmet around her chin. She looked at me with a snaggle-toothed grin. If she said a word, I didn't hear from the engine roaring in my ears, and I nodded at her a sign of assurance and control.

I had no problem putting the gear in drive, and we were off. A triangular flag was tied to the top of a small metal pole and flapped in the wind. It was my monument of freedom and success.

We whipped by trees and cotton fields and bumped over dirt mounds. Missy's hair blew from beneath her helmet, whipped at my shoulders and covered her face. She brushed it away with her tiny hands. I was doing fine, turning the wheel when I needed to turn, waving at the giggly bystanders who waited near the front porch for their turn in the passenger's seat. Driving didn't seem so hard after all. I felt experienced. I was invincible.

Each driver was allowed to take five passengers, one after the other, before switching drivers, and I was scoping to see which friend I would take next. As I waved at the crowd, I heard Missy scream and I turned to see her pointing at a ditch covered in kudzu. I panicked and forgot everything I learned in the past five minutes of wheeling around the house and along side

the cotton fields. Somehow, I had missed my right turn, crossed over the gravel driveway and was heading toward the ditch. From the vines and leaves, I thought the ditch might be a gorge and Missy and I would fall to the bottom with the go-kart and never be seen again.

I looked at Missy in panic and yelled for her to jump from the go-kart. I never felt for the brake pedal. I don't think I realized it had a brake pedal since I'd never driven anything motorized before. Missy Pitcock and her long hair flew out one side, and I went out the other. The go-kart continued toward the kudzu and crashed. The tires disappeared beneath the vines.

Mrs. Carmichael ran across the road and pulled Missy up by her arms. Then, she ran towards the ditch yelling for me. "I'm here," I murmured and hesitated to raise my arm. I wasn't injured, but buried myself in the dirt wishing I had been.

Mrs. Carmichael's face was red with anger. Brooke stumbled toward the scene and began to cry at the sight of her go-kart, her newfound vehicle of freedom sinking before her eyes.

I stood amongst the girls and told them it was my fault they had to call their parents to come pick them up. I dreaded calling mine, who would pick me up with a lie on my hands and a big, fat mechanical bill. On the drive home, I told my parents the truth. I never confessed to my friends it was my first time to drive a go-kart. I only told them I was sorry for ruining the party.

The fear my grandfather put in me kept me honest, not only with others but also with myself. Even now, passing kudzu growing around trees and covering ditches reminds me of my punishment working in the garden. It keeps me asking myself, *just how honest am I?*

After those long Saturdays in the garden, my mother would watch me carefully. When she thought I was lying, she would say, "Don't you dare lie to me." She would remind me that

lies would pull me down in life. It was a vague warning but effective. I always thought she meant they would pull me to my grave, like Papa Belk had said, and bury me inside the earth forever. I believed her.

A Quiet Town

I drove to Como because Aunt Dottie told me Charles Lindbergh had a son living there. I was curious. I hadn't been to the town in several years. And although I grew up there, I never knew about him while I lived there. I don't know if I was more curious about the town or Lindbergh. Aunt Dottie said during the 1950s, he would fly to Como to hide from the media. She called it a "secret paradise."

I never knew what she meant by "paradise." I understood "secret" only because those living in or near the town know it exists. Since I can remember, buildings have been falling apart, yards have been overgrown with weeds—weeds so high you can't see the iron gates in front of the houses anymore. No one seems to live there. No one wants to live there. To me, it's a ghost town. But knowing that Lindbergh would make secret trips to Como sparked my interest.

Aunt Dottie first told me the story of Charles Lindbergh and Como parties when my family and I were sitting in a circle on beach towels salted by seawater, our summer routine in Perdido Key, Florida. The tide was coming in and most vacationers had gathered their chairs and umbrellas and were out dining at one of the tourist hot spots. I overheard Aunt Dottie say Charles Lindbergh had a son living in Como. I was 22 years old at the time, and it was the first I'd heard of it.

Como is a small town in northern Mississippi. It is almost as north as you can go before hitting the Tennessee line. The land is flat—part of the Delta—and the soil, silted from being flooded for thousands of years, is some of the most fertile soil in the world.

My family has lived in Como all their lives. And my Aunt Dottie tells a story so rich with big bands and big names, you would expect Gatsby himself to step out on the front porch and marvel at the well-to-do crowd. But Como is far from the West Egg of Long Island and sitting on the beach, Aunt Dottie was over hundreds of miles from home and could tell me the story out loud. Since then, she has told me several times, and I remembered every detail as I drove to Como.

The year was 1926

It was hot in Mississippi during the summer, humid and heavy to breathe. The field hands wore hats in the cotton fields to shade their faces from the sun. They dragged long, tube-like sacks over their shoulders up and down each row picking the cotton bolls from the stems and putting them in the sacks. The dirt-stained cotton tubes were white and held hundreds of pounds, and the field hands worked until sunset.

Como was one of the wealthiest towns in the region because the railroad tracks ran straight through the center of town. The tracks stretched along the earth and curved at the edge of the horizon. When the train came through, people turned to watch and the horn blew—filling the

sky with noise and billowing smoke. The train owned the small town for the short time it passed through. And just like that, as fast as it arrived, it left. Most things did in Como.

The town had two classes, the very rich and the very poor. All of the rich had plantations, and among the richest plantation owners were the Taylors, who made up half of Como's population.

Old Man Taylor owned two homes, a town home and plantation home. He called his plantation Home Place Plantation. He had one daughter, Maybelle, whom he adored.

Maybelle was a southern belle, tall and slender and prim and proper. Her face was soft and round and framed with her dark, straight hair. It was long and flowed down her back. Sometimes, she pinned it up in loops. She dressed elegantly in the finest 1920s clothing: lavish hats, luxurious gowns, and mink scarves if it was cold enough. When she walked, she glided with her chin slightly raised.

She was an alumna of Vassar College, and her father had prepared her for a life of luxury. He had planned for her to marry a wealthy man, one he had handpicked.

The field hands, however, picked one first.

Charles Lindberg was a U.S. Air Mail pilot living in St. Louis, Missouri. One morning he was scheduled to fly to New Orleans, but his friend Don Bartlett flew his route instead.

As Bartlett was flying over Mississippi, his engine failed and he crash-landed onto Home Place Plantation. The field hands dropped their sacks and ran toward the smoke puffing above the cotton stalks. They pulled him from his plane and carried him to the plantation home where Maybelle spent weeks tending to his open wounds and broken bones. They soon fell in love.

Old Man Taylor was outraged and said, “You will not marry this pilot. He is a no-good-fly-by-nighter with no steady income. He is not good enough for you.”

Maybelle married Don Bartlett partly in defiance of her father, and her father said, “Since you married Don Bartlett you can use the land as long as you live, but it will never be yours to sell. It will go to your children when you die.” And he gave Maybelle and Don the town mansion.

The year was 1958

The farmer rode on his horse up and down every row in the cotton field. The crooked stems raised the soft white fibers high off the ground. The farmer watched the cotton pickers and Aunt Dottie, who was eight years old, could see his dusted brown hat galloping above the cotton tops.

Aunt Dottie lived next to Maybelle and Don Bartlett. She watched as her Uncle Bill examined the ground and all that grew from it. She saw the field hands and wondered why they worked so hard for the cotton. She liked picking it too when it wasn't so hot out.

Sometimes, she helped. She put her dark hair beneath a cloth hat, because the sun liked her dark hair and it was hot, and she pulled her long dress up to her knees to hold the cotton and followed the field hands up and down the rows. Aunt Dottie snapped cotton from the stems she could reach and piled them onto her dress. Then, when she could hold no more, she poured them in the white sacks hanging around the necks of the field hands.

At night, Aunt Dottie would watch the Bartlett's parties from her kitchen window and would dream of being invited to them. The window was wide and tall. There were no curtains or blinds to block the view. Aunt Dottie would pull a chair to the counter and take her wobbly body and climb onto the cool marble top. She would sit on her knees and press her face against the glass, hoping to see the afternoon sun casting silhouettes of evening gowns—hooped skirts twirling like dark umbrellas on her patio. She would unlatch the locks on the window, push the glass up with her tiny hands and hear music and chatter and the clicking of high heels on the stones.

“When I was up there, I could see through the trees,” Aunt Dottie said. “My view was almost clear, and I could see them and hear them. Many cars would drive up to the home and their headlights would shine bright in my driveway. That's how close I was.”

The Bartlett's town mansion, built in 1859, stood tall like a monument four stories high. Massive white columns stiffened like security guards beneath the wraparound porch, and the wooden panels on the porch floor and ceiling were painted a pastel blue to keep the mosquitoes and evil spirits away. The antebellum home was covered in large gaping windows, each with heavy curtains pulled to the side. Delicate woodcarvings decorated the exterior just beneath the roof, and the wooden balcony swirled around the second floor lifting anyone who stood on it within arm's reach of magnolia blooms.

Behind the home was the grape arbor, at least 200 years old. It was tall and wooden, about 100 feet by 20 feet. That's where the parties would be held when the men returned home from their quail hunts. Their bird dogs would lie at their feet.

Muscadine vines weaved in and out of the white wooden planks covering the arbor. And sometimes, when the berries were a dark purple, their juices would drip down the side and onto the stone patio. A sticky, sweet scent would stain the stones purple. They were beautiful stains.

When the day would grow dark, the arbor would light up. Thumb-sized white bulbs would cast damp light through the vines. Chairs would cluster the patio and during the party, servants in white coats and white pants with silver trays and hors d'oeuvres would walk in and out of sight. There would be a bar to the side with a bartender and guests would tap their feet to the recorded beats of Benny Goodman and the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

“I would see John Wayne and Tallulah Bankhead,” Aunt Dottie said, “and would hear Tallulah’s smoky voice drift through my window. I would see Lindbergh there; there was always Lindbergh since his non-stop flight in 1927 from New York to Paris.”

In 1932, Lindbergh’s oldest son, Charles Lindbergh, Jr., was 20 months old and had been put down for bed on the second floor of their New Jersey home. When Lindbergh went to check on him, he was gone. They found a ladder leaning against the house by the window. They received several ransom notes for money saying they would return the baby for the desired amount. Several weeks later, Charles Lindbergh, Jr. was found in a ditch. He had been kidnapped and killed. Police arrested a carpenter and executed him, and believed their nurse also had something to do with it. This pushed Congress to pass the Federal Kidnapping Act or “the Lindbergh Law,” which makes transporting a kidnapping victim across state lines a federal crime.

After the kidnapping, Lindberg would spend much of his time in Como to escape from his pain and the media. In Como, there was not even a town newspaper.

Even after having four children, Maybelle was still tall, slim and composed. She had three girls—two who were identical twins—and one boy. The three girls were much older than Aunt Dottie and she never knew them well, but the youngest, Mike Bartlett, was around Aunt Dottie's age. They often played together between the two houses. Aunt Dottie wondered why Mike was tall and thin with dark curly hair, and why Don Bartlett was short and squatty. His hair was brown and straight as a board. All of the Bartlett's faces were round except Mike's. His was long and narrow.

After years of watching parties beneath the grape arbor and seeing Mike Bartlett develop into his narrow physical features, Aunt Dottie's curiosity was more than she could handle.

“One afternoon, I walked in while Mama dressed for her club meeting. She was pulling her stockings tight and slipping her pearls over her slender hands and around her wrists. We talked about Charles Lindbergh and how he visited Maybelle and Don a lot. I looked at Mama and said, ‘You know Mama, Mike Bartlett doesn't look like the other ones. Mike Bartlett looks different than every other person in that family. As a matter of fact, Mike Bartlett looks just like Charles Lindbergh.’

She took her pointer finger and pushed her glasses up her tiny nose, looked at me and said, ‘Yes darling, we have thought that for years.’”

During the 1950s, Maybelle's twins, Nancy and Speedy, had everything they wanted. Days before Christmas they were given a car, but were not old enough to drive, so they were also given a chauffeur. Maybelle was having a Christmas party for Lindbergh and other guests, and the twins wanted to get greenery and mistletoe for the party. Maybelle asked the chauffeur to take the girls to the store in their new car. As he drove them across the train tracks, just beyond the front door of their house, the chauffeur, who was born deaf, never heard or saw the train coming. They were hit and instantly killed. Their neighbor, Buddy Lipscomb, was the first person on the scene and told Aunt Dottie he saw the chauffeur sitting up, leaning against a tree and ran to him. When he grabbed him, he fell over. The twin's body parts were scattered along the tracks, and when it came time to gather them, they couldn't tell who was who. They walked and gathered the parts in a wicker basket and Maybelle, who could hear the commotion from her foyer, fell apart.

On Christmas Eve, Maybelle had a casket for each twin in her home. She asked Lindbergh to look at her girls, and then asked if she should look at her girls. He said no, and she never saw them again. Lindbergh and Maybelle often consoled one another during the holidays. Don Bartlett would get drunk.

The year was 2010

There were no field hands or horses on Home Place Plantation. The land belonged to Mike Bartlett and his combine lit up the dark like a monster plowing through the field. He tilled the soil and formed rows with the dirt that reeled out long and narrow. He planted seeds on top of the rows and waited for the rain to bring the cotton.

When I got to Como, I spoke to my uncle about the story Aunt Dottie has told me so many times. He denied every word and told me to keep it quiet. I think he believed Dottie, but didn't want me to ask around and stir up the small town.

Maybelle died in the late 90s and still no one in Como ever speaks of the similarities between Charles Lindbergh and Mike Bartlett. The similarities seem obvious to those living in Como, but since Lindbergh is no longer alive, they only have photos to compare the two men. Most families are still related to the Bartletts or the Taylors somewhere down the line and for that reason, prefer to keep their beliefs quiet.

Lindberg did have a long-running secret relationship with a German hat-maker who had three of his children; DNA tests proved it true in the early 80s. But it wasn't just Lindbergh I was curious about—it was also Como. It used to be a respected place, and now it's falling apart. I thought if I could understand its past, I would understand its secrets. And I would understand why people neglected it and left.

I drove to the Como library, where the librarian gave me Mike Bartlett's phone number and email address on a yellow sticky note.

"Call him," she said. "He's a very nice guy and will be more than willing to talk to you."

I told her I was researching Como, the highlights and low spots of its past. She told me Mike would be perfect because his family was, and still is, the most prominent family in town, and he would be able to give me a solid description of Como.

What would I say to this man I'd never met? "Hi, did you know you are Lindbergh's son?" Or, "People say you don't resemble your father. Instead, you are a spittin' image of

Charles Lindbergh: shy, tall and slim, down to the dark curls and the dimpled chin.” How much could I hold back? And if I did tell him something he did or didn’t know, what would it change?

When anything changes in Como, from cotton prices to next-door neighbors, the town is easily stirred. It’s like an orderly place after a storm plows through, when you see a lost dog in a field or a panicked horse running wild, cotton broken from stems and scattered, trees tossed to the ground. That is the feeling the town has when the ordinary changes—eeriness and confusion. It would be this way if I asked too many questions.

More than anything, I was afraid to cause trouble, not only for Como, but also for my family, the Shaheens. The Shaheen name is respected in Como. Everyone knows it. My grandfather was the town doctor and treated Maybelle’s family regularly since they lived next door. And although we don’t see the Bartletts or the Taylors on a regular basis, we are on good terms with both families.

When locals hear “Shaheen” they think of Dr. Shaheen, a Lebanese man who fought for equality during the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. He treated every patient equally. He walked through the colored door to prove he was no more or less a man for it. My family didn’t want me to stir up our good name by asking Mike Bartlett the questions we all have.

I left the library and drove by the mansion where Mike grew up. It looked just like Dottie described. I saw the grape arbor behind the house. The white paint was peeling off and weeds were growing around the frame. I imagined the music and the chatter beneath it, and imagined

the bird dogs and purple stains on the stones. Most of all, I imagined Lindbergh and believed the place was filled with secrets. I dropped the yellow note inside my bag.

For now, it is better kept quiet.

Lebanese Country Doctor

The smell from my grandfather's medicine cabinets became a part of the house. The cabinets lined an entire wall and were always filled. My grandmother smelled like medicine until the day she died. That smell is the only thing I remember about my grandfather. It was like burning wood mixed with antibiotics and ripe oranges. After I would visit my grandmother, the smell would stay in my clothes until I washed them.

My grandfather's name was Mike, but I call him Pa. He is smiling in all of the photos I've seen of him. It's a shy smile. He wore glasses. His skin was dark brown and his hair was black and curly, even before he died at the age of 78. He wasn't a very tall man, medium built. While he was growing up, he became a strong boxer and in his younger photos, his arms are muscular.

Pa always wore a bowtie when he treated patients. My mother said during medical school he stopped wearing long ties when he noticed them dangling in patients' faces. Grandmother—Mabel—would make him bowties out of scrap material she would find around the house. One of his ties was made from an old window curtain, and another from a tablecloth. I have one of his ties that was made from a bed sheet, but I don't remember him wearing it. I wish I had known him.

Former NBC reporter Kenley Jones may know Pa better than I do. In 1986, NBC aired a special titled, "A Country Doctor is a Dying Breed." Cameras followed him around for a week documenting daily house calls in the cotton fields of Mississippi.

Pa was born in New Hampshire to Lebanese immigrants who escaped attacks in the Middle East in the early 1900s. War and poverty were on the rise in Lebanon and they came to the United States for a better life for their children. In America, they were hesitant to give their real names. And although they entered through Ellis Island, they were afraid of being discovered as illegal immigrants and being sent back to Lebanon. They chose the last name Shaheen, a very common name in the Middle East, much like Jones and Smith in the U.S. Though Pa was born and raised in the U.S., Arabic was his first language and Lebanese food was the only food he ate at home.

When Pa moved from New Hampshire to Mississippi he stopped speaking Arabic after speaking it fluently for over 30 years. He didn't pass the culture and traditions to his children. The only Arabic word my mother remembers him saying is *bousa*, kiss. I wanted to understand why my grandfather lost his language. I always liked the idea of being part Lebanese and I wanted to connect to the culture, but no one in my family knew more than two Arabic words. They didn't even know Lebanese recipes or traditions.

It wasn't until years after asking about Pa, my mother told me he felt like a foreigner in his skin, and that he associated the Arabic language and culture with his poor childhood. Because of his dark skin and heavy accent, he wanted to lose the language. He rarely returned home to visit his family in New Hampshire because he said going back reminded him of his poor childhood.

Before he died, he said he was ashamed for not passing his culture down to his children. He wasn't an immigrant. He wasn't considered a black man either. He could sit at the front of the bus and drink water from the "white man's" fountain.

Pa was the oldest of seven brothers. His father worked in a wool factory, making little money, and the family grew up very poor. Pa told my mother he grew up feeling like a poor immigrant just like his father but instead, he was a foreigner in his own country. As the oldest son, it was Middle Eastern tradition for the younger brothers to work and put my grandfather through school. Once he earned a degree in chemistry from Boston University, he supported his brothers until they could support themselves.

After WWII ended, Pa earned a medical degree from The George Washington University and moved to Mississippi. He never planned to move to the South, but during medical school a friend from Mississippi told him Como needed a doctor. When he called the mayor of Como he was offered a rent-free clinic if he accepted the job.

During the early 1950s, the Mississippi Delta experienced a boom in agriculture after the end of WWII leading to reconstruction in Europe and the demand of farm products, primarily cotton. Como became one of the richest towns in the region from the railroad and farmland.

At the time, people in Como were either very rich or very poor. The railroad tracks ran straight through the center of town and divided the two classes—the whites in their mansions on one side and public buildings on the other. The blacks lived on the outskirts of town.

Pa and Grandmother lived in an antebellum home, built in the early 1800s, known as Sledge Villa. Mr. Sledge, the original owner, had a high position in the railroad business and had

built concrete steps at the edge of the front yard so he could climb them and board the train when it stopped to take him to work in Memphis. Today, there are concrete steps in the grass that are awkwardly facing the tracks. The train rushes right by them. I remember climbing them as a child and pretending to step onto an invisible platform. Of course, I would fall onto the rocks. My cousins and I would take turns seeing if we could jump from the top step to the other side of the tracks.

Sledge Villa was next to the Bartlett's, whose parties lit the Magnolia trees in my grandparent's backyard. Pa and Grandmother always had an open invitation but never went. My grandfather always said, "The doctor never stops working."

After a year of practicing in the clinic, the town said Pa had to pay rent due to legal issues and charged him one dollar a month. Grandmother, who was the bill collector, secretary, office manager and anything else she appointed herself, wrote the check each month and at the bottom, in the memo portion, wrote "under protest."

Everyone who knew Grandmother would say she was "a fireball of a woman." She was petite and proper. And speaking proper English in her presence was a must. She had white hair and said she earned every strand. She called it her crown. I don't ever remember her hair being any color other than white, not even in my mother's baby photos. Along with Pa's ties, she made her dresses and blouses.

Grandmother was from Mississippi and earned a degree in chemical engineering. She met Pa while working at DuPont making bombs for World War II. She was his boss. She said she worked on one of the atomic bombs, and that she was as smart as any man there. She said if she had been a man, DuPont wouldn't have fired her at the end of the war.

After the war, while Pa was in medical school, Grandmother stayed up studying with him. And if anyone asked her, she would claim to have earned her MD along with Pa. Keeping the clinic in line was her job.

The clinic was on the other side of the railroad tracks across from Sledge Villa. Pa treated patients in the clinic and made house calls when needed. If he was home and patients needed him, he would treat them in the old shed he turned into an examining room. I remember the basketball goal mounted to the wall of the shed above the doorway. My cousins and I would chase one another in out and of rooms. We played hide and seek and hid behind medicine cabinets and under exam tables. Rakes and lawnmowers were piled in the corners.

My mother said she loved going with Pa on house calls. Sometimes, the roads in the country were too rough for his old Buick. He had bought the car during medical school and had driven it for years. By the time my mother started riding with him, it was covered in rust. Grandmother had said the only thing holding the car together was the rust.

Pa would travel rural back roads along cotton fields to treat patients. He would drive as far into the country as his Buick would take him, and then the patient's family would pick him up in a mule-drawn wagon and carry him the rest of the way.

There were many times patients couldn't afford to pay him, and he was often paid with chickens and turkeys. At times, patients paid in guinea pigs, turtles, goats and horses. He was also given a monkey and a fawn. If a patient didn't have money or animals to give, he treated them for free. My mother said he would come home without being paid and Grandmother would say, "Mike, you have to start taking money. The doctor and his family have to pay bills too."

My uncle kept the monkey, but it had rabies and he had to shoot it. They let the fawn go into the woods, and kept the rest of the animals in the pasture. Pa built a wooden fence around the pasture for the horses, donkeys and goats. Some of the offspring from those animals are still there today.

Cousin Frank, a black man who was not related to the Shaheens, was a regular patient who lived in the middle of cotton fields and always called for the doctor, even if he was healthy. Pa always treated him when he called. On his foyer wall he had three framed photos: Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Pa. On one house call, Grandmother jokingly said, “Dr. Mike’s photo should be in the center and a little higher.”

The next time Pa went to see Cousin Frank, his photo hung on the wall between Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr., and was a little higher.

Grandmother always told me stories about the house calls. My favorite was about a schizophrenic patient named James. James locked himself in his bathroom and turned on the water in the bathtub. His family yelled for him to turn off the water and come out.

“James, turn dat wata off!” His mother yelled.

“I aint turnin’ dis wata off until Jesus tells me to,” James said.

Water was coming through the bottom of the door and spreading out into the rest of the house.

When Pa got to the house, James’ family rushed to get him inside to James. Grandmother said water covered Pa’s shoelaces.

“James, this is Jesus,” Pa said. “Turn the water off and come out.”

James turned off the water and opened the door.

“Good evenin’ docta,” he said.

He tipped his hat to Pa and walked out the front door.

Every time I was with Grandmother, I begged her to tell me stories. I remember the first time I spent the night with her after Pa died. She told me stories about him for hours, and when she said she had run out, she stood up from her chair and walked me over to a large wooden trunk. She pulled out two items: a two-dollar bill and a skinny bow tie.

I was very excited about getting the money. At ten, I thought two-dollars might buy me something special, like a bag of Blow Pops or a new pack of slap bracelets. I thought about holding on to it and letting the value go up, and then my two-dollar bill would be worth hundreds.

“Grandmother, how much will this be worth in twenty years?” I asked holding up the wrinkled bill.

“Two-dollars,” she said. “What do you think of the tie?”

“It’s okay, but it smells funny.”

I realize now, it smelled like their house and like him and her—like medicine.

I didn’t care to have the tie. It meant nothing to me. She went on to tell me it was Pa’s tie, and she made it out of an old sheet the children slept on. It was a thin material covered in tiny, brown bears wearing red bow ties. I imagined Pa wearing it to his office and I couldn’t take him

seriously. Grandmother drove me to his clinic and showed me around, and it too smelled like her house and clothes.

The smell was so strong in the house that if food stayed in cabinets long enough, bread and vegetables started tasting like antibiotics and decongestants. I remember Grandmother's *lubi* stew; it tasted like aspirin.

I grew up eating *lubi*, a Lebanese green bean meat stew, and I was proud of my mother for making it. Of course, it wasn't authentic by any means. Since my mother didn't have the recipe, she would try to make it like Grandmother's, which was all from memory and the ingredients were always changing.

The entire house would fill with the smell of meat and vegetables bubbling in spicy broth. I remember a friend being over one winter while my mother was cooking it. My friend asked about the smell filling the house. I looked at her with a bit of air, as if the dish was made only in Lebanon and my mother had some special privilege to the recipe, and said, "Oh, that's *lubi*. It's a Middle Eastern dish you've probably never had before."

Without recipes, my mother also made *kafta 'grass maqlieh*, fried lamb patties and Lebanese spiced stuffed cabbage rolls. She cooked *makhlouta*, a lentil soup with rice and beans and *kibbeh*, stuffed meatballs that are made by mincing lamb, spices and crushed wheat into a fine paste, then shaping the paste into balls, stuffing them with chopped lamb meat and then frying them.

Even now, the thought of eating *kibbeh* is still very satisfying. However, I am sure this fine Lebanese cuisine my mother made was no more than an Americanized, deep-fried meatball.

Pa never cooked Lebanese food, it was my fair-skinned, Southern grandmother trying to concoct recipes she had learned from Pa's brothers, and this is the same lady who would plop mayonnaise onto a paper plate and serve it to her church friends as a fancy asparagus dip.

Of course we never could pronounce the names of the dishes. Even after Pa died, we would go up North to visit family, and they would laugh when my mother asked them to make their "kee bee" (*kibbeh*). I remember one of the brothers telling a story about Pa and everyone laughing at how the South had stolen his accent. Then, pretending to have a stethoscope, he listened for heartbeats and talked in a Southern twang. One of the brothers said he wished Pa had moved back North before he died. He said Pa never sounded like a true Southerner with his thick accent. It was a mix of North, South and Middle East.

My mother said Pa didn't want to move back to New Hampshire. He was proud to live in the South and proud he had been there to treat injured protesters during the James Meredith March Against Fear when they came through Como. Before the March passed through, he made his children get in the back seat of his car and he drove them up the highway to see the protesters. My mother said he stared out the window watching and he told them he wanted to march with them, but the doctor had to stay.

My grandfather made sure his patients knew color and race did not exist in his practice and in his beliefs. If he made one thing clear, it was that the Lebanese country doctor did not discriminate against race, sex or religious beliefs.

On one of his first house calls, he went to one of the mansions to treat a white woman he had never met before. She assumed he was a white doctor and opened her front door to let him inside. When she saw his skin was dark, she said, "Niggers aren't allowed through the front door." She walked him around back, and he treated her.

That was the only time a patient asked him to enter their house through the back door, but he wanted to make a statement against racial segregation. Soon after, my mother noticed him walking through the colored door at his clinic. She said if he had built the clinic himself, there would have been one door. Since the clinic was near the public buildings, everyone saw him come and go through the colored door, and the black community respected him and looked at him as a leader.

Pa often treated black men and women who were injured mentally or physically as a result of segregation. Early one morning in 1962, a black man called him screaming and panicked about his unconscious son. His son, 25 years old, had worked in cotton fields since he was a young boy, and noticed when they sprayed the cotton fields with poison, the weeds turned white. He rubbed the poison over his face and neck and poured it all over his body. The chemical went straight into his bloodstream. Pa treated him and then had him airlifted to the nearest burn center.

In 1982, Pa attended his class reunion in Washington, DC. All the doctors were required to stand on stage and tell of their accomplishments. Statements were being made like, "I'm chief of staff of New York General," and another was head of the Pure Food and Drug Administration.

One doctor published many papers on his specialty. Speeches grew more impressive by the minute, and my grandfather worried what he would say.

When he stood up he said, “Well, I’m not the head of anything or the chief of anything. I haven’t published any original papers, but I have delivered a lot of babies. Some of them were in cotton patches and one was in the back of a pickup.”

Everyone stood clapping.

A respected doctor who traveled into the country to deliver babies and treat patients, that was how I thought of my grandfather before I learned he was uncomfortable with his skin color and Arabic language—two characteristics connecting him to his Lebanese heritage, and connecting my dark skin to him. Although he said he had lost his native language, it had always been in his accent. My mother says she took that with her. Growing up, she says she picked up a little of his accent even if the South diluted it. Whether she did or not, I don’t know, but it’s nice to think so. My mother said if I wanted to learn more about Pa, I should go to Como.

I had not been to Como since 2004, in over 7 years. I wanted to see the town and talk to locals about my grandfather. It was December and cold. Wind and rain blew at my cheeks where I stood in the center of town. The sidewalk and street below were badly cracked.

The heart of Como was still tightly packed beside the railroad tracks like an artery that kept it living and beating. Many of the mansions were run down and for sale. From where I stood, the sound of a slide guitar and harmonica slipped through the cracks of a blues bar and into the rain. The bar was next to the clinic.

The clinic had become the city hall and inside the waiting room was low lit. The “colored” door was gone or boarded up. It wasn’t there.

I looked at the man sitting behind the front desk. “This used to be my grandfather’s clinic,” I said.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. “He is the Lebanese country doctor.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

I remember him saying, “is,” as though Pa was still living. He told me there was a library in the back room with stories of the clinic, my grandfather and patients he treated.

“Do you want to take a look?” he asked.

“I do,” I said.

I was surprised how different the clinic looked, but I couldn’t believe how the smell was still there, and how strong it was. Stories in the back room were from the 1950s through 1980s. Friends and patients who knew Pa had written several of them. Some were newspaper clippings, many of riots and freedom marches in Mississippi. Others were written by patients and friends. They wrote of Pa’s calm disposition and his loyalty to every patient he treated. He had submerged himself in the South trying to heal it and he had become a part of it, and it of him. I understood what my mother meant when she said the South diluted his accent.

I thought of the house calls and the stories Grandmother told. Sitting in that back room, I understood Pa more than I ever had before. After reading the stories, the smell of the clinic was on my hands and clothes, and when I left the building two hours later, I took it with me.

Falling Apart: One

Remembering Brandon Presley

Outside the barracks in Camp Lejeune, Marines were on night duty. Visiting hours had been over for a while. “I’m going in first,” Brandon said. “Stand out here and I’ll wave for you to come in.” I had never been to a barracks before. It was all new to me: military bases, mess halls and military talk—cammies (camouflage uniforms), swabbie (a derogatory term for sailor) and pogie bait (junk food).

After Brandon snuck inside, I heard him talk to the Marine on duty, and then he stuck his head out and motioned for me to stay close to the ground. I crawled inside on my hands and knees.

That is my first memory of my boyfriend Brandon as a Marine. We were 18 years old when he joined in 2002. He deployed to Fallujah, Iraq in 2005 and that December, two months before he was scheduled to come home, he died from a suicide car bomb.

After the funeral, I was afraid of forgetting things about him, like the way he moved, his favorite foods, what songs he liked, his habits and even the way he looked. I spent hours writing down everything I remembered, things I paid little attention to when he was alive.

Brandon loved his blond hair. Before he joined the military, he had a little-boy haircut. It fell across his forehead and stuck up like he had rubbed his head against a pillowcase and filled it

with static. He never cut it short or shaved it, so when he joined the Marines and got a high-and-tight he didn't realize how much his hairline had receded.

He would've rather had his hair long. He said he wasn't a jarhead and the higher and tighter the hair, the more serious a man was about making a career out of the military. He kept his as long as he could get by with.

He had a small gap between his two front teeth. Once, he thought about closing it up but decided it added too much personality to his smile to get rid of it. He had squinty, blue eyes and freckles on his nose and cheeks.

If he wasn't wearing cammies or military sweat suits, he was wearing a white t-shirt and khaki shorts. When I think of him, most of the time he is wearing a white-shirt and khakis.

He always smelled like Arrid Extra Dry deodorant. He loved football, cold beer and strawberry Fanta. His favorite movie was *Scarface*, and he always tried talking like Tony Montana.

He loved his family. He loved his paternal grandmother he called G Mama. He lived with her in high school. I don't know what made him move out of the house with his mother. I knew he had run away from her home twice. G Mama said it had been cold and raining the first time, and he called her in the middle of the night to pick him up at a gas station he had walked to. It was closed and when she finally got to him after driving for an hour, he was sitting in the dark

beneath the roof on a black garbage bag he had filled with clothes. He never told me what made him leave his mother. He always loved her. He told me that.

One day we were leaving G Mama's house and she handed him a bag full of hard-boiled eggs. He hugged and kissed her and told her he couldn't wait to eat them. When we drove away, he rolled down his window and tossed them into the woods. He said he couldn't hurt her feelings by not taking them.

He only cried once in front of me. I asked him about his father while we were driving to see his mother. I knew that his father died before he was born. When I asked him about it, he pulled over onto a gravel side road. He said he always wished he had a father to hunt and fish with. He told me his parents had been high school sweethearts and that his father was in a car accident less than a mile from his home and died at the age of 21, before either of them knew she was pregnant with him.

He said G Mama went outside and walked down the road where she could see smoke in the air, and she started running as fast as she could go and even when she got close enough to see the truck burning, she still didn't know it was her son's. People stood around and watched the firefighters and EMTs try to put out the fire and save the driver. They told G Mama it was too late. The boy inside the truck had burned up. He took too sharp of a turn, flipped and burned up. They were crying when they told her, but they didn't know it was her son trapped inside.

After Brandon's funeral, G Mama told me his parents weren't high school sweethearts, but she didn't have the heart to tell Brandon it was a one-night-stand. She said he had it hard

enough as it was growing up without a father. I felt guilty knowing things about Brandon's father that he never knew.

Brandon liked watching hummingbirds feed, and he knew my father loved watching them too. He said he'd like to sit on the front porch with my father and build birdhouses.

He loved to show his muscles and would flex his arms every chance he got. He had a habit of clearing his throat every few minutes. He loved cleaning his ears with Q-tips.

He loved the color orange, and not a muted, burnt orange or the color of fruit, but neon, highlighter orange. When he lived in Japan, he bought me a pair of orange shoes on the Internet and shipped them to my house and made me take a picture of myself wearing them.

He loved a good laugh. The first time I met his mother's family at a reunion, he told them I was vegetarian, and some of them cooked vegetarian dishes. He laughed when I ate a hamburger and had to stand up and explain why I was eating it.

He called me Cam Bam.

He loved to sing karaoke and would always choose Carl Carlton's "She's a Bad Mama Jama," or Ram Jam's version of "Black Betty." When he sang "Black Betty," he changed the chorus to:

Whoa, Black Betty (Cam-Bam)

Whoa, Black Betty (Cam-Bam)

She really gets me high (Cam-Bam)

You know that's no lie (Cam-Bam)

He liked Jolly Ranchers and Sour Apple Blowpops. Once, I packed a box full of them and sent it to him in Iraq, and he gave some of the candy to the children.

He loved to fish. I remember when my father built the pond and pier in front of our house. Our house is on top of a large hill and Daddy had built the pond in one of the valleys. He had filled it with water and stocked it with fish, but had not finished building the pier. It had no wood, only a metal frame. Brandon drove to the house with his fishing poles and tackle box full of hooks, line, jigs and minnows.

It was summer and hot. We undressed down to our swimsuits, laid our poles in the grass and walked along the iron frame with our arms out to balance our bodies on the beams. Daddy had said there were broken fishing lines and hooks tangled around the pillars and had told us not to swim near them, but we jumped in anyway. The water was still thick with mud and we swam from one side of the pond to the other.

Near the center, the water was cold at our feet. Brandon tried to swim to the bottom to see if he could touch it and tried to pull me down with him. But I had seen the land before Daddy had filled it with water. We were floating over a valley. Brandon closed his eyes and swam to the bottom. And when he came up, he said he had caught some big fish down there—as if he had

slipped beneath the valley and into some magical place—but they were too big and heavy and slipped from his hands. He said he couldn't see them once they got away. We swam near the pier and Brandon snagged his hand on a hook. Luckily, it barely pierced him and he pulled it out.

As we walked along the bank, our feet sank into the bottom of the pond. Brandon grabbed my hands to pull me out, and water—thick and dark—ran down our faces and dripped from our bodies. Walking up the hill toward the house, we left mud in the grass and washed it from our bodies with the water hose. I don't remember catching anything that day.

He loved his Toyota Tacoma truck he named Yota. You could always find two things in Yota: sunflower seeds and Tums. He loved BBQ sunflower seeds and always had a plastic cup in the cup holder filled with empty shells. He kept the bottle of Tums in his glove compartment and ate them like candy. I remember him eating the orange ones over any other color and saying he ate them because he liked the taste.

He liked driving 7-ton military trucks. After boot camp, he chose to drive them as his military occupation and sent many pictures of himself sitting or standing on top of the 12-foot-high trucks.

He loved to smile. During boot camp, when he had his Marine photo made in his Dress Blues, he said it was the worst picture he'd ever taken. The drill sergeants wouldn't let him smile. He said he tried to smile twice, but they told him if he smiled one more time he'd "get a fist through the head."

Brandon said if a training Marine wanted to get kicked out of boot camp, disrespecting the drill sergeants would do it. Before the first physical training of the day, a few men who wanted kicked out wrote, "Fuck you" on the side of their pinky fingers. When they saluted, it was the first thing the drill sergeants saw, and they were immediately discharged.

In high school, Brandon had broken his right pinky finger playing basketball and never wore a brace to straighten it out while it healed. He wrote a letter to me during boot camp. He said it was early in the morning and "there are these bugs here called sand fleas, and it was hot, and we were sweating, and the sand fleas were eating us alive. The drill sergeants yelled at us if we scratched. They say the sand fleas have to eat, too. We had to stand saluting while they bit us. One sergeant almost went ape-shit on my ass when he saw my finger when I saluted. I told him I couldn't straighten it out if I wanted to."

Brandon's finger bent at a 45-degree angle when he straightened out his hand, and the sergeant thought Brandon was trying to get himself kicked out of boot camp. "He got in my face and said, 'What the fuck is wrong with your finger? You better straighten it out now or you're gone.'" Brandon said he looked straight ahead while the sergeant yelled in his face. He was so close; spit hit his cheeks with each word. "I broke it playing basketball, sir. 'You better not be fucking around.'"

After boot camp, Brandon had the Marine bulldog tattooed on his right shoulder. It was his first tattoo and was blue, red and yellow. I thought the colors were a little too much, but I told him I loved it. When he got his second tattoo in Okinawa, he pulled down his pants and mooned me to show me the praying hands. The hands were delicately outlined in black ink, and before I

could tell him I liked the design, he said, “This should make you feel better. Now, I’ll always have someone praying for my ass.”

My mother hadn’t always liked Brandon because she thought he had a rough upbringing. His family believed he joined the military so she would accept him. I never told her they felt that way, and I never told his family my mother was one reason he joined, a minor one. He laughed when he told me. He said he wanted to make a better life for himself and for both of us.

I remember sitting in his truck when he told me he wanted to join. He had taken a business card from the Marine table at our high school college day. Brandon said he had no intentions of joining. As he put it, “I was just shootin’ the shit with the recruiter.” But the recruiter started talking about how it would change his life. It would pay for college and make him a man. He told me the recruiter “sounded legit.” Brandon looked at me smiling and said he probably needed the discipline. We both laughed.

The recruiter’s business card was in the floorboard, and I pushed it along the floor with my shoe. Neither of us knew anything about the military.

“I don’t want you to go away to boot camp for three months,” I said.

“But I’ll be back...and better looking,” he said.

At the time, boot camp seemed like the worst part of it. It came and went fast.

When he deployed to Okinawa, he started sending my mother letters and after years, several deployments and a stack of letters, she began to like him. After three years, she invited him on our family vacation for the first time.

When we cruised the Caribbean with my family, I went with Brandon to an art auction. He knew nothing about art. I had my eye on a painting of a Spanish villa, though I didn't recognize the artist and had no intention of bidding on it. Brandon saw me staring at it and decided he was buying me that villa.

When the auctioneer opened the bid, Brandon spoke up, and so did an older gentleman sipping his white wine. The two went back and forth with bids, until Brandon let it go when the gentleman bid 500 dollars. "Who needs a painting?" Brandon said. "I'll go to Spain and build you that villa myself." Before we left, he bought me a print of the painting.

The next night after dinner, he got up from the table, put on his red sunglasses and sat down at the player piano and pretended to be Ray Charles. He was a terrible singer, but he never knew it. He threw his head back and slid his hands across the keys. Everyone near our table turned to watch him and they laughed and clapped. My mother was humiliated.

In Antigua, he told a crowd of local women I wanted my hair braided, but I didn't. They raced towards me and fought over who had gotten there first, and I was forced into a chair while two women started braiding. I couldn't see Brandon, but I could hear him laughing behind me.

The last night on the cruise, Brandon proposed to me on the deck of the cruise ship, but he didn't have the ring with him. He said it was back in North Carolina in the barracks inside a safe drawer where he kept all of his important things. He said he had planned to wait until he was home for good to propose, and not during military leave. I told him we should wait, and that I should probably finish school first. We were only 21 and we had plenty of time.

When Brandon was on life support in the hospital in Germany, I filled a box with movies, candy and lotion. But he died before I could mail it. I remembered he hated his hands to be dry. In Iraq, he had said they were always cracked and peeling. He used one of his calling cards to ask me if I would mail him hand lotion and ointment for his heat rashes. I never did.

He loved custard and poppy seed chicken. If you asked him, he'd probably tell you poppy seed chicken was his favorite food. Every time he was home, G Mama cooked several dishes of it and threw him a surprise party in her garage. Before he deployed to Iraq, I cooked him poppy seed chicken for the first time and he told me it was the best he'd ever had besides G Mama's. It was the last night we spent together.

When Brandon deployed to Japan, I sent him stuffed animals in the mail and he lined his windowsill with them. On holidays, I mailed him snowmen, bears and pumpkins. While he was in Japan, the last animal I sent him was a gray bird I made out of cotton and old fabric pieces. I told him the bird was a representation of myself, and if I couldn't be with him in person, a piece of me would go with him everywhere. He named it Birdman and sent me a picture of himself hugging him, and promised me he would never be without him.

When he died, his mother told me to come by her house and get the things that were special to me. I found Birdman in a box filled with his uniforms and green sweat suits he had with him in Iraq. I took Birdman home.

When I heard Brandon had been taken off life support and died, I crawled into G Mama's room and hid in a corner crying. The lights were off, and I remember staring at shadows on the walls. G Mama was in another room beating her fists against the walls and screaming, "My boy! My boy! My boy! My boy! My boy!"

She had always said Brandon was her boy. "He might not be my son, but he's my boy."

I could Brandon's grandfather trying to calm her and pull her close to him. But his deep voice was shaking and he was crying too.

Daddy must have driven as fast as he could to get to me. He had been a half hour away from Brandon's house when we got the phone call, and was there in seconds, picking me up from the floor like a baby and carrying me to the couch. He sat holding me tightly, staring straight ahead, and even then I remember thinking it was the first time I'd seen him cry.

Before we left the house, I climbed out of Daddy's arms and ran upstairs to Brandon's room. The night before he left for Iraq, we had stayed awake most of the night talking and had fallen asleep watching *Cold Mountain*. In the movie, one of the main characters, a soldier, is killed. That night, Brandon promised me he would come back. I turned on his TV and ejected the movie. Daddy was at the bottom of the stairs when I came down crying, and he picked me up again and carried me to his truck.

For over a year after Brandon's death, I wore his clothes around the house. Mama sat up with me at night, danced around to make me laugh, anything to make me laugh. She sat up with me and watched "Cinderella Man," and told me she was sorry, and wished she could take all of the things she said of him back. She gave me a gift that night. It was the most colorful skirt I'd

ever seen, and she cried as I unwrapped it, and told me it would be perfect when we cruise to the Bahamas during the summer. Under the skirt was a beautiful photo of palm trees. Mama loved using photos as gifts if she couldn't wrap it up with a bow. That night she also told me if she could bring Brandon back she would, and asked if I was haunted by his funeral. She said she only wanted me to think of the good times, and we sat up looking at old photos I had never shown her before.

Brandon is a long list of memories. Sometimes, I forget things about him, and I have to read what I've written. But other times, thinking of him is effortless, like the day we swam in the pond and walked along the bank. Water bled into our footprints and the mud pulled at the soles of our feet. Brandon stepped into the grass to help me out of the pond. He held my hands tight, and the ground held tight to me. I was suctioned.

Falling Apart: Two

Hiding Paper Tigers

I was scared. I bobbed in the water like a cork, like a dead man floating with his head down and arms out. My muscles clenched, but I concentrated on how long I could watch the sea turtles swim away from me until they disappeared. Brandon grabbed the straps on my life jacket and we drifted with the water. I held his hands. They were the only things that felt safe and real. Everything else floated.

I could hear Brandon laughing above the water, and I didn't feel him let go of me but when I pulled my head up he was gone. I ripped the snorkel from my head and splashed around in circles yelling his name. The boat felt just out of my reach, and I hung in my life jacket and cried. I kicked my feet and pushed myself towards the boat, and as I kicked, there was a jerk on my leg that pulled me from my life jacket.

"Brandon!" I yelled. "I thought you were a shark!"

He laughed.

He told me to relax and watch the turtles until the boat came back for us, but instead I watched my feet dangle over the dark water, and it wasn't long until we started swimming for the boat.

"It's a good thing I didn't make paper sharks," he said.

He and I were vacationing with my parents in Barbados. Earlier that morning, he had made paper turtles and put them in the sink to surprise me about the adventures he had planned, but they all disintegrated in the water before I could see them.

There was an origami museum at the Narita International Airport near Tokyo, and while waiting on a delayed flight to Okinawa, Japan, Brandon had toured it, loved it and had been trying to make paper art ever since.

Brandon liked Okinawa. After a year of deployment, he was offered a position to guard and drive one of the Marine colonels on base. If he took the position, he would live in Japan until the end of his four-year military commitment. He said it would be very difficult for him to take military leave and come home, but he wouldn't be sent to Iraq. If he didn't take the position, he would come back to the States and more than likely deploy.

He chose to come home, and less than a month later was told he would deploy to Iraq. I felt I cheated him.

In a 1998 interview Osama bin Laden said one thing I will never forget: "The American soldier was a paper tiger and after a few blows ran in defeat."

Brandon was not a coward. Before he left for Fallujah, he told me he was safe and prepared. He referred to himself as Rambo and threw on his bulky bulletproof vest, lifted a chair above his head and roared like an animal. He cracked jokes. He pinched me, poked me and twirled me in the air, and as soon as I had had enough, he snapped his finger in my face, pointed at me and said, "Don't worry, you will see this again."

I believed him. I didn't know much about the Iraq war. I didn't know much about Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, the hostages and beheadings.

Before Brandon deployed in 2005, he didn't know either, but when he got there, he said it was freezing at night, and gritty and hot during the day with an endless dusty horizon. Local

Fallujahians lived in stone and brick houses and along the street were piles of crumbled brick and clay from IED (Improvised Explosive Device) explosions. He said when locals were injured or killed their dogs became strays and they wandered the streets and sniffed through the rubble.

One afternoon, Brandon called from the base and told me he had met two military rescue divers in the field. Brandon had been in his truck patrolling the area. He told me the divers dove into a pond to retrieve two American soldiers whose body parts had been blown far from the site of a suicide bomb explosion. Brandon said he didn't mean to look, but he saw the divers lift pieces of the men from the water.

This was the first time I'd heard a change in his voice. He had told me he heard these types of stories before joining the military and that's why he chose to fight, but seeing it up close sparked a different feeling than courage. Brandon had always believed that if you acted strong and looked strong, you could be strong. He was afraid.

"I've got to get some ice water in my veins and stiffen up," he said.

He always said that to me when he was scared. Brandon had never seen a dead body before. He was scared but he couldn't turn and run. He was there to help restore order and give food to the people, to help make Fallujah a better place.

Brandon had first showed interest in joining the military after the 9/11 attacks and enlisted in the Marines in 2002, a few months after we graduated from high school. He wanted to fight for something larger than himself. But, I'm not even sure he understood what he was

fighting for. I heard him mention destroying militant Islamists, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, but he never went much deeper than just mentioning it.

Bin Laden said it's hard for a person to understand him and al-Qaeda if the person does not understand Islam. He said Americans impose themselves on everyone and accuse children of being terrorists.

Brandon understood the children in Fallujah. I think he understood them more than he understood anyone else. He said the children were clapping with their parents when it came time to vote for the referendum free of insurgent violence and an aim of establishing democracy after years of repressive rule. It was the first free election in more than fifty years, and about 100,000 Iraqi citizens cast their votes.

To secure the polling sites, Brandon patrolled the streets with other soldiers. He said the children yelled happily and ran alongside the voters, who were holding up their hands to show the ink on their fingertips. People of all ages waved their red, white and black flags from doorways, balconies, and out car windows. Watching the children made him feel strong and powerful, like he had purpose being there.

Brandon sent many letters to my family about Fallujah and of how grateful he was to live in a free country, but he was most passionate about the children and always wrote about them.

"They think we're heroes," he wrote. "I keep candy in my pockets for them, and every day they run up to me like I'm giving them gold."

My mother wrote back to him. She wanted to know about the children and about Brandon. She slowly began to love him, and although she never came right out and told me, I

knew she had some respect for him when she asked me if Brandon was afraid of bin Laden and other terrorists.

Bin Laden believed Americans were the world's biggest thieves and terrorists, and said the only way to fend off the attacks was by using "similar means."

After the World Trade Towers fell, he was the most-wanted fugitive on the FBI's list. They offered \$25 million for information leading directly to him. I never asked Brandon about it. He said by the time he got to Fallujah, the main focus was on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bin Laden wasn't in Fallujah. He was an excuse for war in Iraq and there was no need for me to be afraid. It was Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

I never heard Brandon mention Saddam Hussein. His hanging in 2006 was believed to have ended the life of the most brutal tyrants in recent history. And Brandon never said anything about him. I wonder if he wasn't aware of Hussein's determination to restore power in Iraq. I wonder if he wasn't aware of Hussein's rule—bloody purges, political prisoners and raining poison gas on his own citizens.

But in Fallujah, there is still fighting and bloodshed behind the walls built by the U.S. soldiers. Like Brandon, many soldiers who enlist in the military are young and want to make a better life for themselves or their families. They are unaware of the details of war.

In 2004, U.S. soldiers fought the most intense combat in Fallujah, and between battles, they built concrete walls around the city to keep suspected insurgents from leaving. When many citizens of Fallujah were asked if they respected U.S. soldiers in their city, many said there had been too much bloodshed to ever trust the Americans. I didn't trust that Brandon was safe living

behind those walls. There were days I didn't talk to him, and I watched the news for hours hoping to see him.

He said they were always going on "secret missions." He liked calling everything that, so half of the time I didn't know how risky the mission might be. He called me early one morning and made me memorize what he was telling me so I could repeat it word for word to his mother.

"Brandon, I can't do it," I said.

He laughed. "Tell my mama I love her, and that I'm going on a top-secret mission, destination unknown. I was born to be a winner and I'm gonna win."

He almost sang his words, so I sang them back to him.

That afternoon, he would travel on what the Marines call "the most dangerous road in the world" from all of the suicide car bombs that had destroyed travelers between Fallujah and Baghdad. Months before, soldiers had patrolled the road and seen a man sitting on a motorcycle in the median. When the Marines approached him, he tried hiding behind palm leaves. They checked his sidecar and found a shovel, sharp metal pieces, several canisters, an empty sandbag, an empty beer can and a slice of a metallic mine.

Brandon didn't tell me his convoy would be traveling that road on the top-secret mission: transporting ballots and American journalists from Fallujah to the secret destination. The trucks were carrying antennas so the journalists could broadcast updates on the elections.

I never talked to Brandon again.

A terrorist strapped a bomb to his chest, disguised himself as a civilian taxi driver, and attacked the convoy. The bomber stopped the cab on the side of the road and then slowly drove toward the middle of the convoy. Brandon's truck was in the middle. He leaped from the

passenger's seat and out of the top hatch with his rifle. The soldier driving Brandon's truck told me Brandon yelled for the cab driver to stop, and when the driver didn't, he fired as many shots as he could at the tires.

From the details I've gathered, I imagine that day and Brandon in it. It was a hot, dusty afternoon. Black smoke from the taxicab and brown dust clouds mixed into a thick haze that rose high, spreading out in all directions—the convoy hovering somewhere between the ground and the sky, camouflaged soldiers jumping from trucks, boots hitting the earth and metal clanking against guns and ammunition.

Brandon's truck carried no protective gunner shield or armor kit on the top, and tiny pieces of shrapnel from the car bomb spread across his face. . . . He dropped his rifle and collapsed face-forward over the edge of the 12-foot truck, breaking his jaw, three ribs and his left arm. . . . He tried getting up. . . . He fell forward into the dirt. . . .

Two soldiers dragged him out of the way of gunshots and leaned him against the tire of a seven-ton truck. In front of him, the soldiers fired at the attackers hiding behind palm trees waiting for the troops to pass by, and the journalists riding with the ballots climbed out of the back of trucks and ran toward the front of the convoy. . . . One journalist riding with Brandon bent down and held his hand as he tried to talk. . . . Brandon's left arm hung awkwardly from his shoulder, and he pointed with the other. . . . slurring for someone to save his driver from the fire. . . . The sun was hot on his face and dust and debris blew over his body. . . . He blurred in and out of consciousness. . . .

Helicopter medics lifted Brandon onto a stretcher and flew him to the Baghdad ER. When the doctors cut his uniform from his body, calling cards spilled from his pockets and onto the floor.

For one full day in Baghdad, Brandon's vital organs were stable and he was alert, breathing and responding. But the doctors felt he needed more than two weeks to recover. When he was stable enough to fly, they airlifted him to Landstuhl, Germany on a C-17 cargo jet crammed with oxygen tanks, blood packs, ventilators, heart-rate monitors, chest and intubation tubes, pressure infusers, splints, defibrillation paddles and drugs. The jet held up to 36 patients per flight. Two patients were considered critical-care patients and needed medical care on the plane.

In Landstuhl, doctors had the latest technology: pills that read soldiers' vital signs, computer chips that pinpointed wounds, and operating room laser technology. They saved soldiers whose bodies were torn, burned and twisted, and I'd heard survival stories of men and women whose Humvees were gutted by grenade attacks, whose bodies, with huge, spurting blast wounds, lay ghost-white in spreading pools of blood. They survived. There was hope.

With the slightest change in Brandon's location or condition, a nurse from Germany would call his mother and she would call me. The nurse said after a few days at Landstuhl, he wouldn't return to active duty, but he would be flying back to the States to heal. I thought he'd be home for Christmas with a few broken bones. But, during the five-hour flight to Landstuhl, he struggled to breathe on his own. A medic put him on life support.

I wonder if Brandon thought he might die on that plane, and if he thought it was worth it. I wonder if in those moments when he went in and out of reality, he felt like he was floating between heaven and earth, and if he could touch both at the same time.

I believed the doctors would save him and send him back to me recovering and breathing on his own. Bin Laden said there was no need to try and save the injured and return them to active duty, because American troops and civilians would be sent home in wooden boxes and coffins.

On December 14, two days after the attack, Brandon died in Germany. In the shrapnel that spread across his helmet and safety goggles, there was a fragment the size of a pencil tip that tore through his left cheek just below the brim of his goggles and into his brain stem. It took three stitches to close him up.

An excruciatingly long six days later, I stood on the tarmac at the Memphis airport and watched Marines carry Brandon's body off the plane in a wooden box and put him in the back of a hearse. I couldn't help but think of the many times I drove to that airport giddy and excited to take him home, to kiss him, hug him, lay my head on his chest and feel his voice vibrate on my cheek when he told me stories of the places he'd been.

Instead of being inside waiting to spot him in the crowd, I stood outside in the cold dark next to his family shivering and hugging myself. For the hour-long drive home, we followed closely behind the hearse and I stared through the small, curtained window at the lid of his wooden box until my eyes stung and blurred from crying. I felt he had been ripped from me, murdered.

I wonder if Brandon was scared to die. I wonder if he tried to avoid it. The explosion happened so fast and I hope he didn't understand it enough to be afraid. I had been afraid for him then, and was still afraid for the next two years after he died. I was scared to be without him, scared of not knowing what he was doing at any given moment. People around me smiled, shook their heads the way you would at a child and said, "Cameron, you know what Brandon is doing right now. He is in heaven singing songs and praising God." But, they didn't understand. I wanted to know small details. Was he lying down or standing up? Was he sitting? Was he thinking? Was he laughing? They would say it again. "You know what he is doing, Cameron." But I didn't, and nothing took that fear away from me.

Fear is universal. Pema Chodron said even the smallest insects feel it. We swim in the sea and put our finger near the soft, open bodies of anemones and they close up. Everything spontaneously closes up.

Even paper tigers. And paper turtles.

Before bin Laden was shot and killed by U.S. Navy Seals on May 1, he resisted capture. He was not successful, and although he was the alpha male of al Qaeda, he will be replaced with another and there will be fighting and bloodshed: soldiers, militant Islamists, members of al-Qaeda and innocent citizens living in the middle of war.

Following bin Laden's death, Americans buried his body at sea for two reasons—on one hand, to observe the Muslim practice of burying their dead within 24 hours; on the other, to deprive his followers of a shrine to rally around. They bathed his body, wrapped him in linen,

placed him on a flat wooden boat and eased him into the sea. I imagine he floated before he slowly disappeared beneath the water. I imagine sea turtles swam under him and now over him.

Falling Apart: Three

Waiting on Heaven

Mama told me to go into the back yard, get Daddy's axe, walk into the woods and chop down a tree and scream as loud as I could while I was doing it. She said I would get a lot of anger out that way. I never did. Instead, I slept, hoping to dream about Brandon.

I dreamt I took a boat out on the water at night, and the full moon stood out amongst the stars and I stared at it. Brandon paddled up next to me, and told me about heaven and how God let him write his name in the stars. He said he met his father and that they were a lot alike and he was happy. He didn't want to come back, but I wanted him to do anything he could to get back to me.

"Can you see and hear me up there?" I asked.

"Can you see and hear me?" he said.

"At times," I said.

"Well, it is the same with me," he said.

I asked him if he felt pain when he died. He said no with a smile, and I could tell he was lying to protect me.

"Promise me you love me and you'll never leave me," he said.

After he joined the military, he had started saying that to me before we hung up the phone. If we talked five times a day, he said it five times. At first, he said it out of insecurity, but it became a promise we made to each other. It was our goodbye.

In my dream, I said it back to him. “You know I love you, and I’ll never leave you.”

I didn’t want to wake up from the dream.

In “The Odyssey,” Homer says fleeting dreams have two gates: one made of sawn ivory and the other of polished horn. The dreams that pass through the gate of ivory are deceptive. The ones that pass through the gate of polished horn come true when a living person sees them.

Days after his funeral, he told me he made a deal with God and was coming back for me. I believed him.

“I won’t look like myself,” he said, “but my soul will be the same.”

“How will I recognize you?” I asked.

“When you ask me how much I love you, I’ll say *completely*.”

Whenever I slept, I was always aware of his death and it never bothered me. The tiny gap between being asleep and being awake is cloudy, and I often woke up and forgot he had died and wondered where he was and where he was going.

In ancient Greek mythology, bodiless ghosts drifted across gray fields in the realm of Hades, the final resting place for departed souls. Homer described Hades as a damp, dark and moldy place in the hollows of the earth. It was beyond the sun and the land of dreams, and all spirits, including the heroes, descended into Hades. The ghosts of the unburied were allowed to go above ground and visit the living in their dreams to demand a proper burial.

Brandon had a proper burial. He was buried on December 22. The town square was decorated with wreaths and Christmas lights. Every tree downtown was lit, but those were just town rituals. During the ceremony, there were no open pews. People stood in the aisles near the

back doors. It was about a 7-mile drive from the church to the cemetery, and civilians who were not at the ceremony lined the streets waving flags, saluting or standing with their hands over their hearts.

I remember looking out the window and seeing a small blond-haired boy, maybe four years old, saluting next to his father. Other children sat on shoulders and held up red and blue signs on white poster board that said: “We love you Brandon,” “Gone but Not Forgotten,” “American Hero.”

Police cars had their lights on at intersections. All other vehicles pulled to the side, their occupants standing next to them, watching us pass by. It was like a parade or the Fourth of July, only still and quiet, except for the flags and the blue flashing lights at intersections.

At the cemetery, a white tent covered Brandon’s coffin and the cushioned chairs. I sat. Rain hit the tent while people slowly gathered around.

Marine Honor Guards in their Dress Blues and white gloves stood on both sides of Brandon’s coffin and held the flag over it. One stood at Brandon’s head, saluting. Other guards stood to the side and gave the rifle salute and fired the guns. One played Taps from a trumpet. The guards standing over the coffin slowly folded the flag. With each fold, they smoothed their white-gloved hands over the creases, and then slid the flag away from the guard saluting. Fold, smooth, pull—fold, smooth, pull—it was mechanical. When the flag was folded, the Marine held it to his chest, passed it to the saluting guard who handed it to Brandon’s mother. Another knelt down, saluted and handed her a Purple Heart.

At the end of the service, I stayed with Brandon’s family and watched the Marines lower his coffin into the ground. Colin, Brandon’s brother who was eleven at the time, sat next to me

and pulled a green fleece blanket across our laps. And without taking his eyes away from his brother, he reached beneath the blanket and grabbed my hand. As the coffin went down he squeezed and squeezed harder as it dipped beneath our feet. We walked away while the men shoveled dirt into the hole.

The next day, I put Birdman in a box and brought him to the cemetery. I sat at the edge of Brandon's feet and dug a small hole near his chest and pressed Birdman as far down as he would go. The thought of dirt trapping Brandon's body scared me. I promised him I would never be without him. Birdman was the closest I could get.

In Greek religion and myths, Thanatos was the god of death and the twin brother of Hypnos, the god of sleep. He lived at the end of the earth and appeared to the humans to carry them to Hades when the time allotted to them by the Fates had expired. Afterwards, they were left to wander back to earth to visit the living in their dreams.

Most of the time, my dreams closed on top of me like a steal door and it was hard to wake up. Other times, they barely covered me like a veil and I could rip right through them. Although my dreams felt real, they were never lucid. If they had been, maybe I could have asked him questions I wanted to ask instead of hoping he'd come right out and answer them for me. But in most dreams, I was chasing him or he was chasing me. There were rarely moments of stillness.

In one dream, some men found Brandon's bones in a box and decided they were going to clean them and re-bury him. They dumped his bones in a nearby swimming pool, and after the decay washed away, they would put him back together. At first, the thought terrified me,

dumping his bones in a pool of chlorinated water. I had known those bones when they were covered in living flesh, flesh I ran my fingers across and kissed all over.

I was standing at the edge of the pool when the men dumped him in. I didn't want to watch, so I turned my back to the water. A man from the group, whom I had never seen before, thought it would be funny to throw me in with the bones. As I saw him coming at me, I slipped and fell backwards into the pool. The back of my head hit the water, my mouth opened and I sank to the bottom. The pool was full of decay and I came up out of the water spitting and gasping in horror. I panicked to get out as quickly as I could.

"Cameron," Brandon said, and I turned to see him smiling and slowly wading through the pool towards me. I could see the white of his bones.

I climbed out before he could get to me and started running into the woods. I remember losing my breath and scraping my bare arms against branches.

Soon, I came upon a log cabin, went in and locked the door behind me. I tried squeezing my body beneath a twin-sized bed, but it was too low to the ground, so I climbed on top and hid beneath a fleece blanket.

Brandon knocked. "I would sell every bone in my body to be with you," he said. I covered my eyes with my hands and listened to his voice. "You are the only reason I want to be alive."

I cried and shook with fear and hoped he couldn't get in but he was already in, and I heard his feet on the wood floor coming towards me. He pulled down the blanket. My palms still cupped my eyes, and I slowly spread my fingers so I could see him, but barely.

At his visitation in the funeral home, I used my hands this way when I actually saw him for the last time. My mother told me not to look. She said the image of him would stay with me if I looked, and every time I think of him I'll see him lying in the casket in his Dress Blues and white gloves, his blond hair shaved far back from his forehead so the doctors could drill the hole to release the pressure on his brain.

I stood against the wall with my hands over my eyes, and then slowly spread my fingers and inched towards him. His mouth, I thought, his mouth didn't look that way. It never did. Who did that to his mouth? His lips were a bright shade of pink and slightly angled. They were never angled, and then I remembered his jaw was broken.

It reminded me of the time Brandon broke his jaw swapping punches with a friend after watching the Lennox Lewis vs. Mike Tyson fight in 2002. He played Tyson and pretended to go for the boy's ear twice but laughed, and the boy threw an undercut at Brandon's chin.

The next day, Brandon drove to the pool where I worked. He had his window down and elbow out, and when he parked, he leaned and smiled with a mouth full of wire that looked like Hannibal Lecter's caged mask, and I jumped back.

"It's my trophy," he said through his teeth.

"You didn't win. Your jaw is broken," I said.

"I would've won if I could've thrown the first punch. I should've gone ahead and taken his ear."

He was holding a red, plastic cup filled with poppy seed chicken that G Mama cooked and blended until it was thin enough to suck through a straw, and while I threw chlorine tablets

into the water, he followed me around talking through his teeth and moving his lips in all directions to shape the sound.

I leaned over him in the casket, still looking through the small spaces between my fingers. I wanted tell him, “I’ll take you to get your jaw re-aligned and your mouth wired shut. I’ll make you poppy seed chicken and homemade chocolate ice cream. I’ll take care of you. You will be okay again.”

A part of me wanted to touch him, to grab his shoulder and shake him. “Wake up,” I would scream. “You don’t belong in that box lined with pleated silk. Get out of there. Take your gloves off. Let’s go.”

I was afraid the Marine saluting at his feet would yell at me if I touched him, but I was more afraid to drop my hands from my eyes to see him, to completely see him without my fingers breaking him into pieces.

Brandon didn’t look injured from a bomb explosion. There were no burn marks, no scratches. I tried to find the smallest scrape or a scab beneath his left eye. There was nothing. His face was smooth with powder. I closed my fingers over my eyes and cried.

Brandon’s death was like being covered in mud that was clammy and too thick to sling from my skin. I wanted to shatter ceramic mugs and glass plates; I wanted to use every bit of my energy to throw them against the wall, hear them break into tiny pieces and watch coffee drip down and stain everything it touched.

There were times I thought this feeling was gone. After five years, you would think it would be gone. But, when I least expect it, or shouldn't expect it, I feel it come over me again, and not just when I hear Ram Jam singing "Black Betty," or smell poppy seed chicken, but when I am completely absorbed in something that doesn't relate to him.

The other night, I had a dream about Brandon. It was the first time he'd been in my dreams in almost a year. It was daytime outside and the only light in the room was coming through my window. He lay beneath my bed on the hardwood floor in his khaki shorts and white t-shirt. He was on his stomach and smiled at me when I bent down to see him. "You're going to get your shirt all dirty," I said, and I grabbed his hands and pulled him out from under the bed. That was the only thing I remember saying to him, "you're going to get your shirt all dirty." I don't remember him saying anything back. We sat on the floor and hugged, my head on his shoulder. My entire body was relaxed and content and I remember thinking, this is how it feels.

When I woke up, I could still feel it. I fell back asleep so I could hug him again, but he wasn't there the second time.