

The Looking Glass



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It was killing Iraqis and losing friends that transformed me. Having to kill was hurtful in its own way, but losing best friends was unbearable. I had to bury the emotions deep to survive and stay sane. I found that I had to dehumanize myself to get through my deployment. I become a robot, a rock, a hollow shell. When I returned from war, I didn't revive my former ability to love or experience joy. I had walled everybody off who would make me feel. All that remained was fear and anxiety because those were the only two emotions necessary to survive as a grunt. Looking at the world and my relationships through this darkened lens caused pain for everyone around me, especially those who tried to get close. Chances were that if you made me feel, I'd pop smoke and disappear. It was what it was.

One of the hardest days of my life started out like countless other patrols. It was a hot day in May. I was with half my platoon on a route clearance in Humvees. I sat in my usual spot behind my platoon leader, Lieutenant Brad Kelley, listening to the battalion radio frequency. A good friend, Mark Steppe, was on the gun. As usual, he was keeping an eye out and ready to pounce on any approaching vehicle. Our jokey driver, Steve Wantz, was keeping a

fast pace. We'd taken a lot of casualties in the past few weeks, and it seemed to happen quickly. I'd lost two best friends and a commanding officer in mere weeks. So we were pretty subdued on this patrol. We were tired and hot, and just wanted the patrol and the day over. We weren't so lucky.

The explosion was several hundred meters away, but it still shook our truck. My heart dropped, and the tension surged.

Oh shit, I thought. *Someone got fucked up again*. The nervous energy was palpable in our truck. My lieutenant peered back at me enough for me to see the sweat on his brows.

"Sergeant Ervin, was that a controlled detonation? Talk to me. What's squadron saying?" he asked in his deep voice.

"Wait one, sir, nothing yet." As soon as I'd finished saying it a frantic voice broke the silence of the radio. A Charlie company soldier was saying one of their vehicles had been hit. It was on fire, and they couldn't get close enough to figure out casualties.

"It's bad, sir. They're not calling a medevac. They're just east of checkpoint four on Route Jackson."

We were very close, and I knew our platoon leader would have us out there soon. I radioed squadron and told them we were on the way. Without a word, Wantz gunned the accelerator. Steppe hunkered down a little further in the turret. This one was bad, and we could probably expect to be hit on the way out. It was a short but tense ride to the site of the attack.

When we pulled up, the fireball was all I could see. A thick, black plume of smoke was curling into the sky. Some of the soldiers from the other Humvees in their patrol were crouched

around taking cover. I dismounted. There were screams and ammunition cooking off mingling with the hiss and whine of the flames. I told myself the sounds were just the flames. I went to grab the fire extinguisher but the lieutenant stopped me.

“We need to secure a perimeter out further. Hop in with your squad leader.”

I followed orders and mounted another Humvee. We all exchanged glances, but didn't say much. We took our time clearing the outlying buildings before we returned. We all knew what was coming.

A few vehicles had showed up by the time we got back. Several soldiers were scouring the area on a police call. It wasn't cigarette butts we'd be looking for, though, and nobody had to tell us what to do once we dismounted. There were four body bags laid out in a row. Two of them contained the burnt hulks of soldiers. The other two just had bits of flesh. That sweet, sickly smell of burnt meat filled my nose as I approached the medic standing by the body bags. He gave me a grim look as he handed me one glove.

“Sorry, sergeant, we're short on gloves. Just fill the other two bags evenly if you can't tell what's what.” He pointed to an area to search, and I nodded. So, I thought, that's how this goes down.

I searched the ground and felt happy that I didn't know these Charlie company guys. At that, it didn't seem like the two I was picking up suffered much. They were what we called “pink misted” by the blast. I told myself I wasn't really picking up people. The small bits of flesh glinted in the sunlight, and I made my way back to the body bags when my hands filled with the burned flesh. It

didn't bother me too badly. When I'd heard the blast an hour before, I'd shut myself down. I was getting good at going stone cold. The detail was over before I knew it. I was smoking cigarettes in a bunker afterward, and the only remarks I made were that it had been "a bad fucking day."

A week later we were manning a checkpoint. I was dismantled, but Wantz, Steppe, and the lieutenant were in their usual spots in a Bradley this time. Something had happened down on the other end of our position, and Steppe began shooting at a truck that was speeding away. I started shooting, too. It was so easy to walk down there, drag the Iraqi's still-gasping, bullet-hole riddled body out of the truck, and conduct a search. The smells were still evil, but I was used to them by then. It was simply an unpleasant and disgusting task, which I desired to be done with quickly. That day wasn't over yet, though.

One of our patrols en route to help an hour later was hit by an IED. I lost another friend. No kind of anger or sadness overwhelmed me. It was just another day in Iraq.

What had happened to me started early in my deployment with my first kill. The attempt at numbness started right away. It was difficult at first, but eventually it became as comforting as seeing an old friend.

A van came through a checkpoint we manned, and we shot it up and killed its three occupants. I was horrified when I searched the vehicle that time. I couldn't even do it, really. The smells were overwhelming and the sight of shredded human bodies was a shock to see. I vomited, fought back tears, and couldn't sleep for

days. I was angry at the Iraqis for not stopping. I was ashamed of myself for pulling the trigger even though I knew I had no choice. I felt pity for them. I just kept imagining what it would have been like to be inside that van. I couldn't convince myself that they weren't humans. I couldn't make myself stop feeling.

I couldn't turn it off when they killed my best friend, either. He was our first casualty. It hit close to home. I'd known Kevin for years. We'd had plenty of fun together and shared a lot about our lives. I could call him a brother. Rage and sadness overtook me upon hearing the news and I became ready to kill. When we did a mission at the site of his death the next day, I became a savage. I destroyed the insides of Iraqi homes and terrified the people. I was frustrated that they were unarmed because I couldn't blow them away. By the end of that day, I was still ashamed of myself. It still hurt.

After we lost our commanding officer to a car bomb, then losing another best friend the following week, I realized the emotions of life and death were too much for me, so I shut down my emotional connection with the world. My moral paradox with the decision to shoot at people or not had been relegated to the impersonal Rules of Engagement. I didn't have to love or hate; I just had to *do*. I was a real grunt after that. *That* is how I'd been able to pick up those guys without flipping out. I felt strong in that I'd forcefully buried all that pain and grief. In essence, I had dehumanized myself. I would later learn that feelings in general were the essence of life.

Upon homecoming, I transitioned from combatant to college student. I was pretty happy because I knew I wouldn't have to experience the horrors of war again. I was free to pursue my studies and the career of my choosing. I reconnected with people from whom I'd been separated for four years and even had some fun. But that unfeeling, emotionless person followed me home. There was no off-switch besides a superficial one in which I grew my hair out and stopped rising at dawn. I didn't understand what had happened, though. It took time to learn what that transformation did to me. It was another rough road.

I knew something was wrong almost immediately. The anxiety and tension of being ready for combat never really went away. Not sleeping exacerbated the anxiety and usually left me in a dark mood. I started feeling the edges of the anger and hurt over all that loss. I was quick to lose a temper I never had before. I tried my best to keep it buried and to keep on going like normal. Soon, I started to struggle. The pain was readily visible to the people closest to me. When they tried to enter my headspace and help me out of that miserable place, I came to realize my most serious problem.

The harder people tried to reach out to me, the harder I pushed them away. Just like I had in the war, I made myself an emotional island. I felt no connection with people and had no idea how they could ever help me. I couldn't talk to them about what I was feeling because I didn't believe they had the slightest frame of reference with which to shape an understanding. I was afraid to

talk about what I had done over there, much less what was going on inside. I hardly understood myself, but certain patterns emerged. Again, its beginning was distinct, and again it was painful. This time it wasn't ending a life that started it, but the slow, agonizing sabotage of a loving relationship.

We were together in high school for a time, and we reconnected once when I was home on leave once. We fell in love and started a relationship that lasted through the war. I moved in with her after the war, and we planned on getting married. But only a part of me returned. The man she fell in love with had changed. I went through the motions, more or less. I was distant and often in a bad mood. As time went on, I became apathetic and indifferent to our relationship entirely. While I didn't try to hurt her, I also didn't try to help her understand or to meet her halfway emotionally. It had the same effect. As I watched her become more and more miserable, I knew my lack of empathy would destroy her. It was time to let her go. I could deal with losing her. That was nothing new to me. I just couldn't maintain an emotional bond.

For a long time I kept my emotional distance from people. I didn't care to take on a truly meaningful role in anyone's life or let anyone do the same for me. It didn't matter if they were family, friends, or girlfriends. I acted the part of a real person and went through the motions to avoid uncomfortable questions. In relationships I always pushed away when things got serious. I really was just a shell of a person. I lacked passion in anything I did and I couldn't enjoy anything. At most, I could be content, but

that contentedness was measured only by the absence of anything terrible. Over time, even being content became a struggle.

With the lack of any positive counterbalance the darkness took over. I was left with crushing anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, frustration, anger, and a general sense of malaise. I'd have several days of intense anxiety and anger followed by days of the despair produced from dealing with all of that. As this continued, I realized I wasn't living. I was just surviving. I asked myself if I had really died in the war. I had no idea how to restore myself, but I kept going. I just put one foot in front of the other. It led me down a path which led to another process altogether.

It took years of an increasingly miserable state of being to learn something I'd heard often but never quite believed—that knowledge made a difference. I'd heard the term “avoidance” from my therapists and counselors quite a bit. I argued that those terrible memories were consistently at the front of my mind, so I didn't see how I was *avoiding* anything. I wished I could. I came to understand the meaning of the concept. It was a coping mechanism that I had employed since that first kill and I had perfected it along the way. I learned that the remedy was finally *feeling* the emotions that were repressed for so long. There's no simple way to do this, but it's exactly what I ended up doing, but quite unintentionally.

I decided to write the story of my war. I did it to purge the memories, but it had the same effect as reliving them. I recorded every terrible thing that happened in the war in detail. I wrote about the killing, the violence, the intense fear, and the maddening

frustration. I had to force myself to recall the emotional content that was buried for so long. It wasn't easy. Dredging up those details and facing their full force was horrifying at times. I did it for the sake of the story because I knew its effectiveness depended on emotional honesty. When I got toward the end, I realized what I'd done.

After I penned the last line of the memoir, I was overwhelmed for weeks. There was a torrent of virtually every emotion that exists and they were stronger than anything I'd ever felt. I let myself cry over my lost friends, and I allowed myself empathy for those we'd killed. I felt the intensity of the fear and anger over the frustration. I saw the contours of the mental transformation I'd undergone to protect my sanity. I saw how I'd shut it all down and never turned it back on. I understood what happened to me emotionally as well as physically. By forcing myself to re-experience these things with emotion, it allowed me to recreate the experience in a manner which could allow for the healing process to begin.

The opening of those floodgates did many things. Some were good, others bad. The darkness of what I became in the war is much more real to me now, and it is more haunting. But the lens of my perspective has widened. I'm finally experiencing the brighter side of life again. I've smiled with simple pleasure. I've come to tears that could be called "happy" ones. I've felt the warmth of a hug again. These emotions are intense to me after being so long buried. No doubt, it will be another long process to get used to them. That process will include addressing the pain of

living in that shell for so long as well. I regret many things about life since the war. While I'm learning how to manage these things, I'm also realizing their tremendous value.

In my life, the meaning of the war hides in how it rearranged my emotions, making my perspective clearer. I appreciate the value of feeling as a human being *because* I've felt the absence of that aspect of my personality. Tears, smiles, nervous butterflies, happiness, excitement, and even sadness are what give our existence real meaning. I have learned that we must allow ourselves to become close to others and to share those emotions. They make the difference between surviving and living. I'll never take nervous butterflies for granted again. If learning the significance and beauty of this life took the misery of war, then maybe it was all worth it.