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PROLOGUE

You could see it in his nervous eyes. You could see it in his shaking hands. You could see it in the three prescription bottles in his room: one to steady his galloping heart rate, one to reduce his anxiety, one to minimize his nightmares. You could see it in the screensaver on his laptop—a nuclear fireball and the words *FUCK IRAQ*—and in the private journal he had been keeping since he arrived.

His first entry, on February 22:

Not much going on today. I turned my laundry in, and we're getting our TAT boxes. We got mortared last night at 2:30 a.m., none close. We're at FOB Rustamiyah, Iraq. It's pretty nice, got a good chow hall and facilities. Still got a bunch of dumb shit to do though. Well, that's about it for today.

His last entry, on October 18:

I've lost all hope. I feel the end is near for me, very, very near. Darkness is all I see anymore.

So he was finished. Down to his final hours, he was packed, weaponless, under escort, and waiting for the helicopter that would take him away to a wife who had just told him on the phone: "I'm scared of what you might do."

"You know I'd never hurt you," he'd said, and he'd hung up, wandered around the FOB, gotten a haircut, and come back to his room, where he now said, "But what if she's right? What if I snap someday?"

It was a thought that made him feel sick. Just as every thought now made him

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Adam Schumann on his last day of war

feel sick. "You spend a thousand days, it gets to the point where it's Groundhog Day. Every day is over and over. The heat. The smell. The language. There's nothing sweet about it. It's all sour," he said. He remembered the initial invasion, when it wasn't that way. "I mean it was a front seat to the greatest movie I've ever seen in my life." He remembered the firefights of his second deployment. "I loved it. Anytime I get shot at in a firefight, it's the sexiest feeling there is." He remembered how this deployment began to feel bad early on. "I'd get in the Humvee and be driving down the road and I would feel my heart pulsing up in my throat." That was the start of it, he said, and then Emory happened, and then Crow happened, and then he was in a succession of explosions, and then a bullet was skimming across his thighs, and then Doster happened, and then he was waking up thinking, "Holy shit, I'm still here, it's misery, it's hell," which became, "Are they going to kill me today?" which became, "I'll take care of it myself," which became, "Why do that? I'll go out killing as many of them as I can, until they kill me.

"I didn't give a fuck," he said. "I wanted it to happen. Bottom line—I wanted it over as soon as possible, whether they did it or I did it."

The amazing thing was that no one knew. Here was all this stuff going on, pounding heart, panicked breathing, sweating palms, electric eyes, and no one regarded him as anything but the great soldier he'd always been, the one who never complained, who hoisted bleeding soldiers onto his back, who'd suddenly begun insisting on being in the right front seat of the lead Humvee on every mission, not because he wanted to be dead but because that's what selfless leaders would do.

He was the great soldier who one day walked to the aid station and went through the door marked *COMBAT STRESS* and asked for help and now was on his way home.

Now he was remembering what the psychologist had told him: "With your stature, maybe you've opened the door for a lot of guys to come in."

"That made me feel really good," he said. And yet he had felt so awful the previous day when he told one of his team leaders to round up everyone in his squad.

"What'd we do now?"

"You didn't do anything," he said. "Just get them together."

They came into his room, and he shut the door and told them he was leaving the following day. He said the hard part: that it was a mental health evacuation. He said to them, "I don't even know what I'm going through. I know that I don't feel right."

"Well, how long?" one of his soldiers said, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," he said. "There's a possibility I won't be coming back."

They had rallied around him then, shaking his hand, grabbing his arm, patting his back, and saying whatever nineteen- and twenty-year-olds could think of to say.

"Take care of yourself," one of them said.

"Drink a beer for me," another said.

He had never felt so guilt-ridden in his life.

Early this morning, they had driven away on a mission, leaving him behind, and after they'd disappeared, he had no idea what to do. He stood there for a while alone. Eventually he walked back to his room. He turned up his air conditioner to high. When he got cold enough to shiver, he put on warmer clothes and stayed under the vents. He packed his medication. He stacked some packages of beef jerky and mac 'n' cheese and smoked oysters, which he wouldn't be able to take with him, for the soldiers he was leaving behind and wrote a note that said "Enjoy."

Finally it was time to go to the helicopter, and he began walking down the hall. Word had spread through the entire company by now, and when one of the soldiers saw him, he came over. "Well, I'll walk you as far as the shitters, because I have to go to the bathroom," the soldier said, and as last words, those would have to do, because those were the last words he heard from any of the soldiers in his battalion as his deployment came to an end.

His stomach hurt as he made his way across the FOB. He felt himself becoming nauseated. At the landing area, other soldiers from other battalions were lined up, and when the helicopter landed, everyone was allowed to board except him. He didn't understand.

"Next one's yours," he was told, and when it came in a few minutes later, he realized why he'd had to wait. It had a big red cross on the side. It was the helicopter for the injured and the dead.

That was him, Adam Schumann.

He was injured. He was dead. He was done.

Two years later: Adam drops the baby.

The baby, who is four days old, is his son, and there is a moment as he is falling that this house he has come home to seems like the most peaceful place in the world. Outside is the cold dead of 3:00 a.m. on a late-November night in Kansas, but inside is lamplight, the warm smell of a newborn, and Adam's wife, Saskia, beautiful Saskia, who a few minutes before had asked her husband if he could watch the baby so she could get a little sleep. "I got it," he had said. "I got it. Get some rest." She curled up in the middle of their bed, and the last thing she glimpsed was Adam reclined along the edge, his back against the headboard and the baby in his arms. He was smiling, as if contentment for this wounded man were possible at last, and she believed it enough to shut her eyes, just before he shut his. His arms soon relaxed. His grip loosened. The baby rolled off of his chest and over the edge of the bed, and here came that peaceful moment, the baby in the air, Adam and Saskia asleep, everyone oblivious, the floor still a few inches away, and now, with a crack followed by a thud, the moment is over and everything that will happen is under way.

Saskia is the one who hears it. It is not loud, but it is loud enough. Her eyes fly open. She sees Adam closed-eyed and empty-armed, and only when he hears screaming and feels the sharp elbows and knees of someone scrambling across him does he wake up from the sleep he had promised he didn't need. It takes him a second or two. Then he knows what he has done.

He says nothing. There is nothing he can say. He is sorry. He is always

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sorry now. He has been sorry for two years, ever since he slunk home from the war. He watches his wife scoop up the baby. He keeps watching, wishing she would look at him, willing her to, always so in need of forgiveness, but she won't. She clutches the crying baby as he dresses and leaves the room. He sits for a while in the dark, listening to her soothe the baby, and then he goes outside, gets into his pickup truck, and positions a shotgun so that it is propped up and pointed at his face. In that way, he starts driving, while back in the house, Saskia is trying to understand what happened. A crack. A thud. The thud was the floor, and thank God for the ugly carpet. But what was the crack? The bed frame? The nightstand?

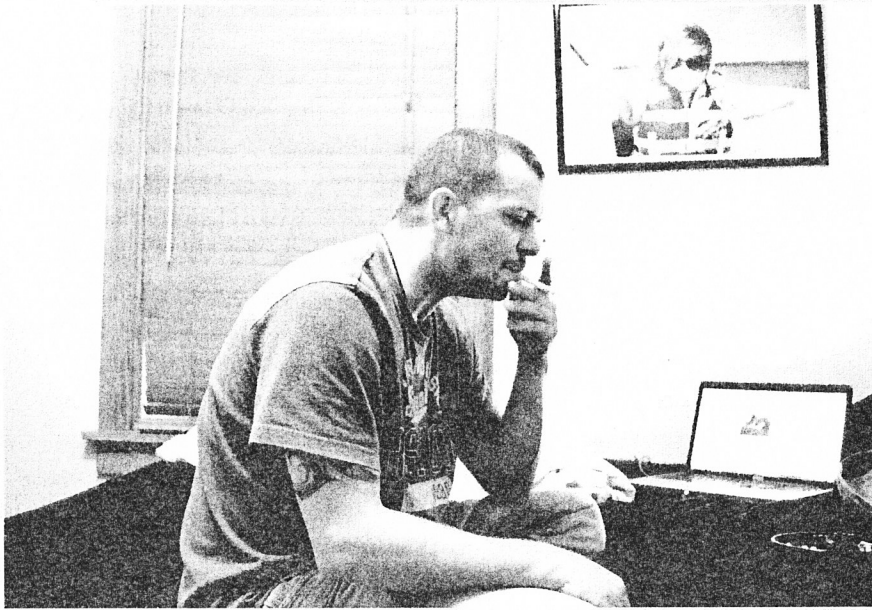
This baby. So resilient. Breathing evenly. Not even a mark. Somehow fine. How can that be? But he is. Maybe he is one of the lucky ones, born to be okay. Saskia lies with him, then gets up and comes back with a plastic bottle of water. She drops it from the side of the bed and listens to the sound it makes as it hits the floor.

She drops a pair of heavy shoes and watches them bounce.

She finds a basketball and rolls it off the edge.

She fills a drink container with enough water to weigh about as much as the baby, and as Adam continues driving and considering the gun, not yet, not yet, not yet, not yet, she rolls that off the edge, too.

Two years. He is twenty-eight now, is out of the army, and has gained back some weight. When he left the war as the great Sergeant Schumann, he was verging on gaunt. Twenty-five pounds later, he is once again solid, at least physically. Mentally, though, it is still the day he headed home. Emory, shot in the head, is still draped across his back, and the blood flowing out of Emory's head is still rivering into his mouth. Doster, whom he might have loved the most, is being shredded again and again by a roadside bomb on a mission Adam was supposed to have been on, too, and after Doster is declared dead another soldier is saying to him, "None of this shit would have happened if you were there." It was said as a soldier's compliment—Adam had the sharpest eyes, Adam always found the hidden bombs, everyone relied on Adam—but that wasn't how he



Adam Schumann at home

heard it then or hears it now. It might as well have been shrapnel, the way those words cut him apart. It was his fault. It is his fault. The guilt runs so deep it defines him now. He's always been such a good guy, people say of Adam. He's the one people are drawn to, who they root for, smart, decent, honorable, good instincts, that one. And now? "I feel completely broken," Adam says.

"He's still a good guy" is what Saskia says. "He's just a broken good guy."

She says it as an explanation of why on some days she has hope that he will once again be the man he was before he went to war. It's not as if he caused this. He didn't. It's not as if he doesn't want to get better. He does. On other days, though, it seems more like an epitaph, and not only for Adam. All the soldiers he went to war with—the 30 in his platoon, the 120 in his company, the 800 in his battalion—came home broken in various degrees, even the ones who are fine. "I don't think anyone came back from that deployment without some kind of demons they needed to work out," one of those soldiers who was with Adam says.

"I'm sure I need help," another says, after two years of night sweats and panic attacks.

"Constant nightmares, anger issues, and anytime I go into a public place I have to know what everyone is doing all the time," another of them says.

"Depression. Nightmares of my teeth falling out," another says.

"I get attacked at home," another says. "Like I'm sitting in my house and I get attacked by Iraqis. That's how it works. Weird-ass dreams."

"It has been more than two years, and he's still beating me," the wife of another says. "My hair is falling out. I have a bite scar on my face. Saturday he was screaming at me about how I was a fucking bitch because I didn't have the specific TV he wanted hooked up."

"Other than that, though," the one who might be in the best shape of all says with an embarrassed laugh, after mentioning that his wife tells him he screams every night as he falls asleep. He sounds bewildered by this, as do they all.

"I have to admit a day doesn't go by that I don't think about those days, the boys we lost, and what we did," another says. "But life goes on."

Out of one war into another. Two million Americans were sent to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. Home now, most of them describe themselves as physically and mentally healthy. They move forward. Their war recedes. Some are even stronger for the experience. But then there are the others, for whom the war endures. Of the two million, studies suggest that 20 to 30 percent have come home with post-traumatic stress disorder—PTSD—a mental health condition triggered by some type of terror, or traumatic brain injury—TBI—which occurs when a brain is jolted so violently that it collides with the inside of the skull and causes psychological damage. Depression, anxiety, nightmares, memory problems, personality changes, suicidal thoughts: every war has its after-war, and so it is with the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have created some five hundred thousand mentally wounded American veterans.

How to grasp the true size of such a number, and all of its implications, especially in a country that paid such scant attention to the wars in the first place? One way would be to imagine the five hundred thousand in total, perhaps as points on a map of America, all suddenly illuminated at once. The sight would be of a country glowing from coast to coast.

And another way would be to imagine them one at a time, starting with the one who is out in the middle of a Kansas night, driving around and around unseen. Toward dawn, he returns home. He doesn't mention to Saskia where he has been, or what he had been thinking, and she doesn't ask. Instead, the shotgun is put away, the baby awakens for his next feeding, their other child, who is six and anxious and has begun wetting her bed, awakens after doing so again, and a breaking family whose center has become Adam's war wounds gets on with another day of trying to recover, followed by another day after that.

He doesn't believe anything is wrong with him. That's part of it. He stares at himself in a mirror, ignores what his red eyes look like except to see with continuing regret that he still has two of them, does the inventory. Two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs, two hands, two feet. Nothing missing. Symmetrical as ever. No scarred-over bullet holes. No

skin grafts over bomb burns. Not even a smudge in the tattoo covering his right forearm, needled into him between deployments as a display of undying love, which says SASKIA in letters constructed of stick figures in various poses of having sex. He is physically unmarked, so how can he be injured? The answer must be that he isn't. So why was he sent home with a diagnosis of severe PTSD? The answer must be that he's weak. So why was that diagnosis confirmed again and again once he was home? Why does he get angry? Why does he forget things? Why is he jittery? Why can't he stay awake, even after twelve hours of sleep? Why is he still tasting Emory's blood? Because he's weak. Because he's a pussy. Because he's a piece of shit. The thoughts keep coming, no way to stop them now, and yet when he goes into the living room and sees Saskia, he gives no indication of the pandemonium under way.

"Good morning," he says, an act of civility that some days takes all of his might. Not that she doesn't know, but he betrays nothing until he goes outside and sees that the neighbors have once again tied up their dogs on short leashes and that the dogs are tangled up and howling.

"God. People," he says with disgust, and that is enough to loosen this morning's version of the leash that Saskia finds herself bound by every day. Now her own storm begins over what her life has turned into, and there's no sure way to stop hers, either.

"They have a forty-thousand-dollar car, and they live like shit," she says, getting into the driver's seat of their car, an aging SUV with a cracked windshield and balding tires. "That's what this town is, forty-thousand-dollar cars and people who live like shit."

The town, called Junction City, population twenty-five thousand or so, is adjacent to Fort Riley, the post where Adam deployed from and returned to three times during his seven years in the army. It is in the part of Kansas between the populated east and the wide-open rest of the state, a geography that tends to evoke in people who don't live there idealized notions of America's heartland and the poetry of the plains. As for Junction City itself, it has long had a reputation as a scruffy place, and the downtown neighborhood where Adam and Saskia live bears that out. Across the street is a convicted sex offender—a pedophile, Saskia

suspects. Nearby is a drug dealer, and a few doors down is a parolee who keeps coming over and asking to use the phone. Poetry in the heartland: while Adam was gone, Saskia slept with a gun.

Their own old house is small for four people and two big, sweet, sloppy dogs, but it is what they can afford. It cost a little over a hundred thousand dollars. It has two small bedrooms on the main floor, and another bedroom in the basement, carved out of the grungy furnace room. Their bedroom is the one with three hidden guns. The baby, whose name is Jaxson, sleeps down the hall, and the basement is for Zoe, the six-year-old, who at bedtime has to be coaxed again and again to go down the steps.

Saskia found the house and bought it during Adam's final deployment, the one that wrecked him. This was where they would claim the life they both had expected to have by his enlisting in the army: house, kids, dogs, yard, money, stability, predictability. She knew he was coming home ill, but she also knew that he would be better once he was away from the war and back with her, that just by her presence he would heal. "That fairy-tale homecoming" is how she thought of it. "Everybody's happy. Kind of like an it-never-happened kind of thing." When he got home and wasn't happy, she told him she understood, and when he said he wasn't yet ready to be around a lot of people, she understood that, too. Her patience, she had decided, would be bottomless. They rented out the house she had fixed up for him and moved to a vacated farmhouse out in the country. It was beautiful there in autumn, but less so in winter, when the fields turned to stubble and the gray sky lowered on them. The isolation finally became too much when one of their cars broke down, so they came back to Junction City, and Saskia decorated the bedroom with a wall stenciling that said "Always Kiss Me Goodnight."

He did. Then, dulled by prescriptions for anxiety and depression and jitteriness and exhaustion and headaches, he didn't. And then she didn't, either, not always, and gradually less than that, and one day she confided to a friend, whose own husband had also come back ill from the war: "My mood changes every day. One day, it's: He's really hurting. The next is: Stop this. Get over it. Get your ass up."

"Nothing will get better," her friend said of what she had learned. "Nothing will be as it was before. Nothing will be the way I want it to be. So I have to come up with reasonable expectations of what can be."

"The women have to be the ones to adapt. That's the way it is for all of us," Saskia said as her friend nodded, and now she is beginning another day of trying to do just that as the neighbor's dogs howl and Adam climbs into the passenger seat. For whatever reason, her irritation keeps growing, and the fact that she realizes it and can't stop it makes it worse. She drives a few blocks and abruptly pulls into a convenience store.

"Need gas?" Adam asks.

"Unless you want to push," she says.

"Need anything from inside?"

She doesn't answer.

"Doughnut?" he asks.

"No."

He fills the car and goes inside to pay, and when he comes out he's holding a Mountain Dew and a handful of lottery tickets.

"Are you *kidding* me?" she says as he starts scratching off the first of the tickets. She hates that he wastes money on lottery tickets, much less on Mountain Dew. "Keep dreaming," she says as he tries the second one. She drives through town and follows a minivan onto a ramp to the interstate. "Why are they braking? *Why are they braking? WHY ARE THEY BRAKING?*" she yells.

She hits the gas and flies around an old woman, alone at the wheel, as Adam tries the third one.

"Last night, I passed by that bridge by Walmart, and there was a bum sitting under it surrounded by a huge pile of scratch-off tickets," he tells her. "Somebody gave him some money, I guess, and he used it to buy scratch-offs."

"That would be you," she says.

He tries the fourth one as she accelerates to eighty. They are on their way to the VA hospital in Topeka, sixty miles to the east, for a doctor's appointment. The war left him with PTSD, depression, nightmares, headaches, tinnitus, and mild traumatic brain injury, the result of a mortar round that dropped without warning out of a blue sky and exploded

close enough to momentarily knock him silly. Between his government disability check of eight hundred dollars a month and his \$36,000-a-year salary from a job he managed to find, he is pulling in about two thirds of what he made in the army, which is why Saskia hates when he wastes money on lottery tickets.

He tries the fifth one and announces, "I won ten bucks."

Saskia looks at him. "You spent five," she says. "You made five. What are you going to do with five?"

"Buy a pack of cigarettes."

She hates that he smokes. She hates that he wants to be alone so much now, either fishing or hunting or out on the front porch having a cigarette in the dark. She hates that her patience didn't turn out to be bottomless after all. A truck swerves in front of her. "You *asshole*," she shouts.

It has been eight years since they met. This was in Minot, North Dakota. She was just out of high school, a girl who never missed curfew and was now on her own in a cheap basement apartment, and one day she emerged from the basement to the sight of a local boy with a rough reputation sitting in the sun without a shirt. What Adam saw was a girl staring at him whose beauty seemed a counterpoint to everything in his life so far, and that was that, for both of them. Soon came marriage and his SASKIA tattoo, and now here they are, her hitting the gas again and him reaching over to tickle her, break the tension, make her laugh. She flinches, as if his fingers have blades on them, and she accelerates until she's only a few feet from another slow-moving car. "*Get out of the way!*" He moves his hand to the back of her head and caresses it, and this calms her enough to slow down to seventy-eight.

Sometimes after they fight, she counts his pills to make sure he hasn't swallowed too many and checks on the guns to make sure they're all there. The thought that he might not recover, that this is how it will be, makes her sick with dread sometimes, and the thought that he might kill himself leaves her feeling like her insides are being twisted until she can't breathe.

The truth is that he has been thinking about killing himself, more and more. But he hasn't said anything to her, or to anyone, not lately, because what would be the point? How many psychiatrists and therapists has he talked to? How many times has he mentioned it, and where has it gotten him?

"... daily thoughts of SI [suicidal ideation] running through his mind," the psychiatrist who ordered his medical evacuation from the war noted just before he was sent home. "States it is alarming for him to think this way, and while he's had suicidal thoughts in the past, this has been unremitting for him over the last few months."

"Having much less suicidal thinking, but the thoughts come to him quickly," a different psychiatrist noted a few months later, after he had come home.

"His thoughts come and go in phases. He has had thoughts twice this month," another psychiatrist noted a few months after that.

"He acknowledges occasional suicidal ideation, that he would be better off dead, but he has never had a serious plan and never made an attempt. He does have guns but his wife keeps them away from them unless he needs to go hunting" was the next report, a few months later.

"You have suicidal thoughts: you reported daily thoughts of suicide with a plan and a means. However, you repeatedly denied intent to harm yourself due to care for your family" was the next one, which went on to note: "You have the ability to maintain minimum personal hygiene."

Well, at least there's that, Adam thought when he came across that report. Crazy, but clean. He found it when he was down in the furnace room going through papers to see what he might need to bring with him to the VA. His medical file is thick and repetitive and soon bored him, and he turned his attention to several boxes filled with letters that he and Saskia had written to each other while he was overseas, love letters all. They wrote to each other just about every day. That's how they were. He read a few, and when they started making him a little sad over what had been lost between them, he moved on to other boxes, pausing when he came across a single piece of paper with a title on it that said "Places I Have Been."

It was an old piece of paper from his grandfather, the other great soldier in the family, a list he had once made.

Atlantic Ocean.

Naples, Italy—filthy.

Pompeii, Italy—Interesting.

Rome, Italy—Beautiful.

Grosseto—We fought a tough battle there.

Vatican City—Very Beautiful.

Nice, France—girls. wow.

And that was it, one soldier's World War Two. When he came home, he never talked about what he had been through in Grosseto, or Nice, or even crossing the Atlantic, when he would have been filled with the naive optimism of a soldier who hasn't yet reached the war. Instead, he turned into an angry drunk who stayed that way for years. He fought in Korea and stayed that way, and then in Vietnam, and only after twenty-five years of serving his country and being abusive to his family did he get himself under control.

Adam was nine when he got to know his grandfather, and it's hard to say who was more in need at that point. No longer drinking, his grandfather had lapsed into a life lived mostly in silence. Adam, meanwhile, had arrived at the crucial point of a ruinous childhood. When he was very young, he was sexually molested by an older neighborhood boy who was babysitting him. When he was six, he remembers, his father one day started hitting him and kept at it until Adam's mother picked up a chair and charged her husband with it. When he was nine, his mother said one day, "Your father's gone. He's not coming back," and it was true. Adam had been doing well enough until that point—honor-roll grades, no shortage of friends—but his mother had no money, and soon they were evicted from their house, sleeping at a relative's and living out of a car, and then they were moving in with this strange old soldier, who as far as Adam was concerned was just one more man who was going to let him down.

Instead of ignoring him, though, or abusing him, the old man would pile his bruised grandson into his Cadillac and take him for long drives. Just the two of them, keeping each other company. He never said a word, except to swear at other drivers. "You fucking bastard," he would scream, and then keep driving in silence, smoking incessantly. At home, he didn't talk, either. If he was reading the newspaper and wanted to show someone something, he would point to it with his middle finger, always his middle finger, and slide it across the table.

That someone was usually Adam. His grandfather was his first experience with war wounds, and Adam grew to love him, and soon after the old soldier died, he joined the army and became a great soldier and now has his own list of places he has been.

United States—born, molested, beaten, abandoned, girls. wow.

Iraq—We fought a tough battle there.

Interstate 70 in Kansas—"Hi. This is Adam Schumann," he says on the phone now, Topeka nearing, calling to confirm his appointment at the VA. He listens for a moment and hangs up.

"The appointment's not till tomorrow," he says to Saskia.

She shoots him a look, starts to say something, doesn't.

So he says it for her.

"Goddamn it."

They ride in silence for a few miles.

"Fuck," he says. "Fuck."

"Well it's not my fault," she says. "Maybe you should write shit down." She gets off the interstate at the exit for the hospital. Maybe they can worm their way in somehow. "Why didn't you call this morning?"

"I was sure it was today," Adam says. He rubs his forehead. He slaps his head. He drums his fingers on his leg.

There's the hospital in the distance. Saskia slams on the brakes at an intersection in order to avoid a woman crossing the street against the light. "*Dumb bitch*," she explodes.

"God, I can't believe I messed everything up," Adam says.

At the hospital now:

They pass through an entranceway lined with survivors of previous

wars in wheelchairs and "Proud to Be an American" T-shirts. "It just stinks like old people and smoke," Saskia says. They walk down a hallway behind a woman who is giving a tour to two men. "The guys from Vietnam are so expressive, but the new ones, from Iraq and Afghanistan, go straight to violence and suicide," the woman says. "Mm-hmm," one of the men says. One of the worst things about Adam's war, the thing that got to everyone, was not having a defined front line. It was a war in 360 degrees, no front to advance toward, no enemy in uniform, no predictable patterns, no relief, and it helped drive some of them crazy. Here, though, in this new war of Adam's, there is a front line: this hospital. This old, underfunded, understaffed hospital, which nevertheless includes a compassionate receptionist who says she will see what she can do and a doctor who is underpaid and overwhelmed and says that of course he can squeeze Adam in. So in Adam goes, preceded by all of the previous histories dictated about him over these two years, rendered as only doctors and interpreting bureaucrats can:

Topeka VAMC reports you were clean and appropriately and casually dressed. Your psychomotor activity was unremarkable. Your speech was clear and unremarkable. Your attitude toward the examiner was cooperative, friendly and attentive. Your affect was expressive. Your mood was depressed and irritated. Your attention was intact. You were fully oriented to person, place and time. Your thought process was unremarkable, but your thought content was distressed, and irritated with others. You do not have delusions. As to judgment: you understand the outcome of behavior. Your intelligence was average. As to insight: you understand that you have a problem . . .

Saskia waits outside. Sometimes she goes in with him, sometimes not. She wonders if this doctor will be able to speak understandable English, unlike the last one. She wonders if he will look Adam in the eye as he asks his questions or keep his back turned as he types Adam's responses into a computer. She is sure she knows what the doctor will say: Adam is wounded. Adam is ill. Adam needs to stay on his medications. Adam

deserves the thanks of a grateful nation. She is seated near a sign for a suicide hotline that says, "It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help," but she has her own saying at this point: "How much can you pity a person who cannot help himself?"

And then, just like that, as Adam emerges and she sees how lost he appears, even scared, her mood breaks, and she is once again allowing in possibility and all the hurt that comes with it.

On the way home, they pass the little airport where Adam returned from the war.

There were ceremonies when the others came home, raucous celebrations in a Fort Riley gym filled with spangly women, flag-waving children, and signs. "Welcome home, Daddy." "Welcome home, heroes." Straight from the war, the soldiers would march into the gym, in formation, and when they were dismissed a few minutes later, there would be a great rush as the order of the place dissolved into screams and embraces. It happened every time, again and again, as all of the Fort Riley soldiers returned, and at one of the ceremonies, everyone spilled out of the gym and into a perfect Kansas day: blue sky, buttercups in the summer grass, a gentle breeze, and then an unexpected puff of wind. It blew the caps off of men and lifted the flowery skirt of one of the young wives, exposing the thong she had chosen for this day and the new butterfly tattoo she had gotten, and instead of smoothing her skirt back into place, she laughed as she felt it rise like a kite above her shoulders, and the soldier she was with couldn't stop staring and grinning, and everyone around them laughed, knowing what would be coming next, the sex, the desire, the relief that he was home safely, the poetry in the plains, and could there have been a moment further from the one that Adam had when he arrived?

No ceremony, no signs, no spangly dress—just Saskia pressed against a window of the terminal, watching him get off a plane. He descended the steps with the other passengers onto the tarmac, and Saskia thought: *He's a skeleton*. She had been hoping so hard. Now she knew.

As for Adam, as he walked across the tarmac, he wished he were on crutches and covered in bandages. The great soldier, returning from war. He felt ashamed. He walked into the terminal. He dreaded what Saskia

would think of him. Now he saw her. She was smiling her beautiful smile. All of a sudden, he wanted to run to her. Here was his moment of welcome, his chance at absolution, and that was when he noticed the woman standing next to Saskia. He had never seen her before, but she seemed to know him because she was rushing toward him, on the verge of tears.

"Can you tell me what happened to my husband?" she was saying. "Can you tell me what happened?"

That was how he came home. Those were his welcoming words.



Saskia Schumann