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On his grave someone put a cross, made from a propeller. More than once I brought flowers, but the Germans took them away.

Beat.

I don't know why.

Latina
Spouse
(American)

LATINO SPOUSE OF AN IRAQ AND/OR AFGHAN WAR VETERAN. (*Her tone, for the most part, exudes a wry sense of humor.*) Hello everyone. I'm emailing those of you in our support group who have loved ones returning home soon from Iraq or Afghanistan, and I wanted to offer you some suggestions in order to help provide your "returnee" with as smooth a transition as possible back to civilized life.

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And I intend to send you a bundle of them as soon as the boys quit reading them.

GERMAN MOTHER. Stuttgart, August 1914. My Dear Bessie: In Hamburg, I found a letter from [my son] Franz, who had, of course, put himself once again at the disposal of his old regiment.

Last year, when he left the army, my feeling was that, in case of war, he need not take part in it. And now? I would bury myself in shame and despair if he remained at home. The French are bringing up their African troops against us, a white people, but we actually do not hate the French, for they are in their right when they seek to reconquer Alsace. Nor do we hate the Russians, a poor, misguided people, who are led like sheep to the slaughter without knowing why. But we [Germans] hate and *despise* the English, who fight us for mercenary reasons; a brother-people who have been intriguing against us for years, while, to our face, pretending friendship. Never again will I seek their society, as I have done all my life. I will shun them like poison.

So now, dear Bessie, goodbye. After this, you will not have anything to do with me, and I will have nothing to do with an English person. Thank you again for your lifelong friendship, for which I've been very, very grateful. If my son dies, you shall know of it. My existence is terror, fear, anxiety—and yet, if I could gain my country's victory by my boy's death, I would sacrifice him *ten times over*. And so would every woman in Germany. Yours sincerely.]

FRENCH WOMAN. (*Her tone is almost restrained; she is still somewhat traumatized by the memory.*) To the Parents of Lieutenant Harry Wambolt: Eleven o'clock had just struck when my attention was attracted by repeated bursts of machine-gun fire. I saw three planes right above my head. The fight was going on for about half

Berman
Mother
(Berman)

you see them in the movies? I don't think so. Not with a smile on their lips and a happy gleam in their eyes, but rather painfully and with the knowledge that *this is it*.

You'd have to see the wounded streaming back from the front after a battle, above all, to see the light go out of men's eyes. Young men shaking from nervous exhaustion and crying. Strong men they are, or were, who did not or will not have the chance, ever, to live normal lives. People may think they know what war is like.

Their knowledge is facts of the mind. Mine is the war-torn body, scared to soul's depth. When I was in the States, war was far away, unreal. I had read, I had seen pictures, but now I know. Oscar.

DE'ON MILLER. Aaron Cole Austin was born on July 1st, 1982, in Amherst, Texas. Sent home on the Fourth of July, he was my breastfed, blanket-sucking baby boy. He threw his blanket away when he was ten. God, how I wish for that blanket now. It surely would have carried some scent. You couldn't even bleach it out. Lance Corporal Aaron Austin, Team Leader. Echo Company, 1st Marine Division. Killed in action on April 26th, 2004, in Fallujah.

Beat.

My mother once told me that, when it came to Aaron, my parenting skills bordered on contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Aaron always knew how to charm me, how to make me smile. He used to call me "Momma" when he wanted something. I got called "Momma" a lot.

At times I believe I can learn to live a life without my son. After all, I must. And I am certain there are other mothers who have lost their boys who can shop at the local grocer's without the macaroni-and-cheese boxes suddenly causing them grief. But the memory of Aaron is in everything around me.

So much of him has been lost, is fading, breaking down. His blanket, his watch, his uniform. Long after he died, I found a letter I wrote to him that he never received. It's not really something of his, since he never got it. But still, it's *ours*.

In my mind, I add a postscript to the letter. What I would write to my son if I could: "I miss you, Aaron, with all of me, all of the time. I was, am, and will always remain so very proud of you. I just never really believed that your time would come before mine. But son,

De'on
Miller
(American-
Texas

Start

you know, we are forever. By the grace of God, I'll join you someday. I'll meet the mystery of it all, too, and we *will* be together. And how good it will be—to see you again...Mom.”] **END**

Lights fade for a few seconds, and then spotlight on Narrator/Carroll.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Although no single correspondence had, as of yet, stood out above the others, when woven together, they were creating a clearer and clearer image of warfare and everything it demanded of those who had experienced it firsthand and—if they survived—the memories and internal scars these individuals would live with for the rest of their lives.

All five actors take the stage at the same time. This is the crescendo of the play, and through variations in lighting and/or staging, the following scene should look different than any other time the Narrator/Carroll and the other actors have been onstage together. Chaim is slightly apart from the other actors, and he is barefoot.

AL PUNTASECCA. *(He speaks with a slight Brooklyn accent, and the first line is more of a warning than a joyful announcement.)* I'm comin' home! It's official as of this morning. I'm looking forward to seeing you again, but I'm in no hurry to see the expressions on your faces when you see me. I've spent twelve months over here in Korea. The longest thirty years of my life.

CIVIL WAR SURGEON DR. WILLIAM CHILD. US General Hospital. Near Sharpsburg. My Dear Wife: It is now evening, and there is nothing of interest here to write unless I give you some of our hospital operations. How many patients we have I do not know—probably 450. Some are doing well, but no one can begin to estimate the amount of agony after a battle. We win a great victory. It goes through the country, and the masses rejoice.

ANONYMOUS BRITISH WOMAN. November 22nd, 1918. The war is over. In Trafalgar Square I saw a merry mob having one hilarious time. Tommies, New Zealanders, Australians, and South Africans are all dancing arm in arm. Fireworks are displayed, horns shouting, street lamps and windows show life again, and the people smile.

With every new letter, however, those layers were being peeled back. The most powerful messages weren't even the ones that recorded the *enormity* of war; as critical as these eyewitness testimonies were, and *are*, the endless tallies of body counts and casualties could be potentially numbing, almost too large and abstract. In order to convey war's true nature, the real imperative, it seemed, was to find correspondences that illuminated, in fact, how small—and personal—it is.

Instead of coming on as a group, the actors should come on one at a time from different parts of the stage and immediately exit after reading his or her letter. To keep the pacing brisk, each actor should take his or her place before the previous actor has read his or her last line.

Vera Lee
(American)

WWII WAR NURSE VERA LEE. November 24, 1943. Dearest All: I don't know if this will pass the censor, but I'll tell you what happened this past 13th of September.

We tried to land in Italy all day Sunday the 12th but they were too busy fighting to worry about a hundred nurses on a hospital ship. At five a.m. we were awakened by a bomb falling very close to us. At 5:10 we heard a plane and then that awful whistle a bomb makes, and BANG! You'll never know the thousand things that flashed through my mind those few seconds. I thought for sure I was dying. I couldn't see for the terrific smoke in our room but was a mass of motion trying to find my coveralls. When we got on the deck, I'll never forget seeing this one nurse trying to escape through a porthole but was too large to make it. She was screaming terribly because her room was all in flames. One British fellow saw that she could never get out, so he knocked her in the head with his fist and shoved her back in the room. She died. But it was much better than if she had burned to death while conscious.

Beat.

Someday I'll tell you more about it. Vera.]

WWI CHAPLAIN WILLIAM MAYSE. My Dear Betty: I received your letter last eve, and after reading it, I went for a ramble over another part of the battlefield on the Western Front and saw still more awful sights than before.

I came across one of our boys, decomposed beyond all recognition.

headquarters and the money and valuables removed from them, were distributed among the men. Very few are from persons of education and are full of ridiculous composition and spelling.

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FRENCH
WOMAN
| FRENCH

Begin

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Just in time to be redeployed.
Good luck.

over here. They are much more our brothers and sisters than I think we know.

Tetsuko Tanaka and Richard Luttrell cross to stand in front of the other actors. Their prominence should indicate that the play is coming to an end.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Many individuals who had caused others to suffer reached out, as best they could, to make amends.

TETSUKO TANAKA. Towards the end of the War in the Pacific, we were taken out of our classroom and sent to a war plant to build balloon bombs. After defeat, we were told that some of the balloons had reached the United States but were useless as weapons, having caused only a few forest fires.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. In May 1945, a woman named Elsie Mitchell and five young boys and girls were out picnicking on Gearhart Mountain in Oregon, when one of the children picked up a balloon bomb, not knowing what it was. As they all gathered around the shiny, toylike object, that's when it exploded.

TETSUKO TANAKA. Forty years after the war, we learned for the first time about what is known as "The Oregon Tragedy," involving the loss of six lives. We, who at the time were only school girls, were nevertheless full participants in the war and had brought great suffering to others. My heart was pained to learn that the six victims were Sunday school children on what was meant to be a joyful picnic.

Beat.

I am enclosing 1,000 paper cranes folded, one by one, by those of us who made the balloon bombs. We seek forgiveness and offer a prayer for peace, and a vow that the error of the past shall never again be repeated.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. And, finally, decades after serving in Vietnam, a veteran named Richard Luttrell went to "The Wall" in Washington, D.C., and left behind a letter he had been meaning to write for years.

RICHARD LUTTRELL. Dear Sir: For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai. Why you did not

Tetsuko
Tanaka
(Japanese)

and, this time, knowing exactly where to aim. I walked up to one of the soldiers at the operations desk and asked him if we were still flying out.

Sensing I was nervous, he looked at me and, in a calm voice, said, "Relax. You'll be in a C-130* completely filled with fuel and going relatively slowly at takeoff. So if you do get hit by a missile, it'll be over just like that."

I repeated this story in the email to my family, and I received a two-word response: "Not funny."

And to some degree, they were right. I knew there were risks from the start, but now they were becoming all too real. And one of the reasons I was writing in my journal was in case the worst did happen to me, someone might find it and there would, at least, be a record of all that I had seen and done.

When I told the hotel clerk in Afghanistan that I planned to walk around Kabul by myself, "No, no," he said. "Too dangerous."

But I had come this far, so I decided to venture out anyway. The weather was gorgeous, the sky an endless sheet of blue cellophane. I went to one coffeehouse after another and struck up conversations with anyone willing to talk. Eventually, I was introduced to an Afghan woman whose father had been sent, unjustly, by the Taliban to one of the country's most notorious prisons that was later closed down. She had gone to the site and wrote to relatives about her visit.

MASO MOHAMADI. On Friday I went for a drive to Pul-e-charki, the place where my father had been imprisoned for eight months. Close to 60,000 men were here, many of them killed. The prison is in the middle of a dusty field, and if you look out you see huge dents in the ground from the mass graves. They are slowly rebuilding the prison but I wish they'd make a memorial instead. I think it would be healing for those people whose family members disappeared in the surrounding fields. Much love, Maso.]

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Later, I met an American officer named Kathy McConkey, who shared with me an email that she'd written to her family soon after arriving in Afghanistan, and, again, this was early in the war, when there were approximately 80,000 US service members there.

* Pronounced: See one thirty

MASO
Mohamadi
(Dari)

NARRATOR/CARROLL. When the Luftwaffe began its relentless bombing raids on London and other British cities in July 1940, parents frantically sought to have their children sheltered in the countryside or, even better, taken to safer nations. The parents of nine-year-old Beryl Myatt were thrilled to learn that their daughter had received a visa to leave England on the passenger ship *SS City of Benares** and stay with relatives in Winnipeg. But traveling alone to a new home thousands of miles away was a frightening experience for a young girl, so the Myatts airmailed a happy, loving letter to greet Beryl when she arrived in North America.

Mrs. Myatt
(British)

* **MRS. MYATT.** Now, sweetheart, don't forget what we told you. Show Auntie and Uncle that you really appreciate the opportunity they have given you to have a holiday in one of the most interesting countries in the world. You remember the photograph you had taken at Christchurch school? Well, Mummy wants to know if you'd like us to send it on to you.*

NARRATOR/CARROLL. What the Myatts didn't know was that just four days after it had set sail, the *SS City of Benares* was spotted by a German U-boat.

* **MRS. MYATT.** The weather here is still fairly nice. What kind of weather are you having? Please give our love to Auntie and Uncle, and when you write, you must tell us all about what you are doing.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. The sub fired its torpedoes on the unarmed ship, and 260 passengers, approximately eighty of them children, burned to death in the fire or drowned in the sea.

* **MRS. MYATT.** With tons of love and heaps of kisses. God bless you. Mummy and Daddy.

NARRATOR/CARROLL. Nine-year-old Beryl Myatt was among the dead.

The Myatts, still cheerful and completely unaware of their daughter's fate, leave the stage.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill denied that the firebombing of Dresden was revenge for these types of German attacks on civilians, especially at Coventry, which was nearly wiped off the face of the

* Pronounced: ben-AIR-is