

Leaving

It was sunny outside the day my brother left. The wind was sharp and painful, whipping away any heat the sun might have given off. The light was dim inside the drill hall, lending the scene a hazy feeling. The ceiling was so high that it made the people look like ants, scurrying about and sitting quietly, laughing and crying. There was a feeling that afternoon that pervaded everything. Every joke, every glance, every hug; we were desperate, all of us, to hold on just a little bit longer. And with that desperation came the irrefutable knowledge that not everyone would be coming back. We all knew—though we didn't say it—that the men and women sitting next to us in green and khaki could very well be dead in a week's time.

This day had been a long time coming. We'd known for over a year that my brother would be shipped out in early 2007; we'd just chosen to ignore it. It came up every so often, of course. The subject of Afghanistan would inevitably rear its ugly head as soon as you mentioned your brother was in the military. It stayed in the back of our minds for the most part, inhabiting a small, scared corner. It was easy to not think about it; easy to believe we had more time. Even on that last day, while I teased him about his shorn head, it was still easy to believe that he was just off on another training mission; soon to be back, smelly and dirty, but alive.

When he walked out to the buses though, I realized that he could be coming back in a body bag. I realized that my big brother, whom I've idolized since childhood, the person I think of as the "golden boy", the man who had just told me he loved me: he was leaving for a place halfway around the world, and I hadn't said "I love you" back. I will always regret that, whether he comes home healthy and happy or in a coffin.

I'd never considered the military to be a dangerous job. When my brother left for basic training, I waved him goodbye, happy that he'd finally found something to do with his life. Canada was a peacekeeper, after all; we didn't willfully enter into ill-conceived wars. We protected and we helped, and as a result of that policy, we had few casualties in our missions. When my brother enlisted, Afghanistan was still very much an American operation, while Canada's role was minor. My family felt safe knowing that it would be years before my brother would be deployed, if at all. Then Canada took over, body counts started to pile up, and my family learned the art of denial.

The subject of Afghanistan is sensitive in my house. My mother is understandably concerned about her eldest child, and resents the cause that puts him in harms way. It's not so much that she disagrees with the mission; she just doesn't want her son to be part of it. The hardest part for our family is not knowing. It's the worst feeling in the world, staring at a headline on the computer announcing another rocket attack in Kandahar, and trying to muster up the courage to find out what happened. My heart races and I stop breathing and I can feel my hand tingling where it touches the mouse, waiting to click on the icon. The relief that comes afterwards is bittersweet because it's only temporary; soon, another headline will appear, and I'll go through it again.

Knowing someone in Afghanistan has made it more real in my mind. It's easy to sit in class and discuss the causes and justifications for the mission, but knowing that at that very moment my brother could be dying on some dusty road; it changes everything. I try to remember each moment in case it's the *one*: the moment when his heart stops

beating and my world changes forever. It sounds morbid, I know, but imagining the worst thing that could happen reassures me in an odd way. It's like, as long as I can recognize the danger, it won't happen.

Though it feels like everything has changed, it really hasn't. My life still continues the same as it always has; now it's just in two places. One part is here, going to school and work, worrying about homework and tests, while the other is on a dusty road in Afghanistan, patrolling houses and sleeping in foxholes. Every so often they connect with a headline or a sound bite, or a relayed message through my parents; a tiny connection that brings immense relief.

The day that my brother left, I had no idea what was to come. I hoped, like everyone there, that he would be home again in six months. Almost two months later, I still hope that he'll come home, and when he does, I now know what I'll say to him: I'll finally say "I love you" back.