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## True War Story

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## True War Story

I am eleven years old, and one morning two years ago my Mom woke me up before the sun was even out to say *We are taking your father to the airfield*. I had been sort of prepared for this early morning but I still didn't know what an airfield was, only that it must have something to do with air, of course. I pictured thick fog. A field of heavy air. It made sense to me in the dark, pulling on my clothes and putting my shoes on the wrong feet.

An airfield is where airplanes take off. Those machines, which I'd only seen in pictures until now, were big and massive and they swallowed my Dad up after he hugged me and said *Good-bye, I love you, and Everything is going to be alright*. I believed him because he had never lied to me. He even told me the truth about Christmas and Easter when I was six. There is no Santa Claus and there is no Easter bunny, but Jesus was born and he definitely died but then he came back.

After two years of waiting, so did my Dad. But I should talk about what happened in between. Miss Armstrong teaches reading to our sixth grade class and says that a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

We ate breakfast, just my Mom and me, at a diner open all night. My Mom—Annelise—drank coffee with two sugars and one cream. I had the pancake breakfast with butter, syrup, and blueberry topping just as the sun was coming out. As we sat, she told me that my Dad would go to training camp for a few weeks. That meant he'd be prepared to fight. We drove home in the full light of morning but I don't remember the whole drive because I fell asleep just as my Mom said I didn't have to go to school that day.

That was a Monday. On Tuesday, I didn't have to go to school again and we put a blue star in our window, which meant that my Dad was in the war. On Wednesday, my Mom dropped me off with a note for my teacher. I was nine and in the fourth grade so I had Miss Emmanuel. She was nice and smiled at me without saying anything stupid and embarrassing about how everyone should be nice to me because my Dad was overseas.

"Overseas" was the word that everyone used and still uses to talk about our soldiers because no one knew exactly where they were. They also called our soldiers "the boys" because no one knew exactly who they were. I only knew of my Dad and my best friend Laura Crowley's brother, Rick, who was a sailor and not a soldier. After six months overseas, he came home as one of a hundred and sixty-eight survivors of a submarine attack on a battleship. We call their submarines "U-boats." Now Rick goes to college for free in Wyoming, where the only water he sees is the water he drinks and the water he showers with. He was a nice boy, though, and he said he'd had gifts from Italy and Greece but they sank with the ships.

I chose to believe him about the gifts, but I never asked what they were exactly. I went to the library and looked at books about Italy and Greece, so I know what they could've been. I liked to imagine them on the bottom of the ocean and me and Laura with them sometimes, dancing on the sea floor, able to breathe underwater. If I want to laugh, I imagine fish with silk scarves or clumps of seaweed growing out of garnet- and sapphire-colored vases. Things like that.

But before Rick Crowley ever came home and his family took his blue paper

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star out of their window, before he was even assigned to the ship that would sink, me and Laura would go home to her house where her mother and her aunt would look after us. My Mom worked at the Red Cross during the day. She got paid to tear sheets and roll them into bandages. She put care packages together and wrote letters dictated by young children with parents busy elsewhere and by elderly grandmas and grandpas whose hands were too curled in on themselves to write a whole letter. On Saturdays, she would get me and sometimes Laura to come to the Red Cross with her and make sandwiches out of stuff that wouldn't go bad, like peanut butter and jelly. Come to think of it, I guess it was all peanut butter and jelly that we made. I tried once to put bananas on one and the other women said that wouldn't work.

At Laura's house after school, when her mother and aunt were in the kitchen, we would go in the basement and sit under a card table with a blanket over it. It was our bomb shelter. We were allowed to have water in it, but no crackers because of crumbs. Sometimes Laura's other brother, Alan, would come down and play the drums on the tabletop. We pretended to be mad at him, but it made it more real, like we were in England during the German bombings and the city was falling down around the two of us safe in our bomb shelter.

I told my Mom one day about playing in the bomb shelter and she got angry. *Do you know how frightening that is for the people who really do have bombs falling on their heads? For the people whose cities are falling down around them? You're a smart young lady who ought to know better.* I was ashamed after that and explained to Laura why we had to take the shelter down. She was mad at first but agreed. We solemnly folded up the blanket and pushed the card table to the far wall of the basement slowly, like a funeral procession I had seen when my Grandpa—my Dad's father—died when I was seven.

My Mom didn't think it was worth it to stay mad at anyone for more than an hour or so, and that long only if it was a really big thing to be angry about. She was done being mad at me about the bomb shelter by the time she finished her dinner and we listened to radio together on the couch like we always do. The news didn't mean much to me, only that my Dad was somehow a part of it, a maker of it. As far as I was concerned, he single-handedly captured a German supply convoy somewhere overseas. I never said as much to my Mom.

One year after my Dad's departure, she changed jobs. She said she was tired of the Red Cross and, frankly, I was quite tired of making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Saturdays. She worked as a record-keeper at the recycling plant. It paid the same as the Red Cross and she said it was easy work with no weekend obligations. She still volunteered, though. I know she needed to fill up her time because my company was not yet enough to fill the emptiness my Dad left.

During that first year, we had a rationed Thanksgiving, but we still had dried out turkey at my Mom's parents' house, where the blue star for my Dad was on a cloth banner on the wall by their crucifix. Grandpa can't cook turkey to save his life but he always insists on being the one to do it. My Grandma also tries to tell us that her cranberry sauce is homemade but everyone knows it's not. I had some that tasted exactly the same at a restaurant once. This year, I looked in their house for cans to recycle and found one for cranberry sauce. I figured that it was a good thing because the can could make a bullet or a knife or something. I didn't know exactly what.

We also had Christmas there and I got a lot of handmade gifts, which was okay. We also had hardly any sweets because of how little sugar and butter the coupons allowed for each household. My birthday came and went. My Mom and Laura Crowley and her Mom and Aunt all remembered and took me out to eat. There was no cake, but it was fun. Rick Crowley even came for a visit because he was home by then. He seemed to enjoy himself, but his Mom kept looking at him with the eyes my Dad would give my Mother whenever she got really quiet.

What I didn't know about that year was that my Dad would wear thin at times. His letters were always clear to me because he only said that he loved me and missed me and that he wished he could come home and that, yes, we would go to the movies every Friday for a month when he finally did. This was all he was allowed to say because sometimes, German spies would get a hold of our mail and read about secret locations. At least that is what I saw in a newsreel at the movie theatre when my Mom took Laura and me one weekend shortly after my birthday.

I should explain "wearing thin." It is supposed to mean that a person gets really frustrated with and tired of his or her surroundings and recycles that frustration and tiredness again and again, like aluminum cans recycled into bullets or knives. I should also say that after about a year-and-a-half of my Dad being gone, I found a pile of letters in my Mom's dresser when I was looking where I shouldn't have. They were scary to me because my Dad sounded like a different person in those letters. I felt really stupid because there was stuff I couldn't be told just because I was a kid. That's one of the first times I really got mad about the war.

The very first time was when a substitute teacher in fourth grade announced to the class that Laura's brother Rick was going overseas and that everyone should be nice to her. She started crying quietly in class and no one, not even me, knew what to say. So the teacher sent me to the bathroom with her and started the grammar lesson as we were walking out.

By the time Laura Crowley's eleventh birthday came, it had been almost two years without my Dad at home. Laura's Mom and her Aunt had learned from her tenth birthday to start saving sugar, butter, and chocolate rations for weeks in advance so that there could be a cake. My Mom saved ours, too, but because there were only two of us in the house, our rations were a little less. We still saved enough, though, and Laura Crowley and I each had vanilla-flavored cakes with chocolate icing. It was at Laura's birthday party that my Mom came in late with a yellow envelope tucked into her purse and her quiet expression. She smiled when Laura opened her presents and didn't say anything to me until we got to our house.

Inside, she sat at the kitchen table and told me to sit, too. I thought that it would be bad news, but she said that even though my Dad had been honorably discharged—she didn't say why—he would be okay and would be home in two weeks. For me, it was so simple and quick that I didn't really think of it as anything but what must have been bound to happen. Everything was okay, though, because my Dad was coming home and I could ask him exactly where "overseas" he had been and what parts of the news he had been responsible for. I forgot about the letters to my Mom. At least, I pushed them as far down into my mind as I could.

Laura's Mom came over later with extra cake and she and my Mom sat in the

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kitchen for a couple of hours talking after they told me to go listen to the radio. I did turn it on, at least, and "The Green Hornet" played loudly as I listened as well as I could outside of the door to parts of their conversation. What I heard made me remember the letters. Mrs. Crowley said something about how Ricky was getting a lot better and that my Dad would be okay, too.

When my Dad walked toward us at the airfield, the first thing that I noticed was that his walk was different from what I had remembered. He used to walk with a bob that made his whole upper half move from side to side a little as he walked and his face would have a big grin on it that was as warm and loving as the scarf my Mom made for me the first Christmas after he left. Now he was a little bent over and held a duffel bag over one shoulder. His other hand was in his pocket. He didn't even take it out or put down the bag when he and my mother stopped and looked at each other. It was almost like they were strangers because it took my Mom a minute to lurch forward and put her arms around him. It wasn't the crushing kind of hug she would always give me and gave him before he left. It was like she didn't even know who he was but was supposed to touch him for some reason. He didn't try to hug me either, only took his pocket hand out and patted my hair. *Nice to be home, nice to be home*, he said, a sharp tick to his voice.

My Mom drove home and my Dad stared out the window. I sat in the back seat, upset because I was being ignored. When we got home, my Mom had to guide my Dad back to the bedroom. I stood at the door and watched her help him lay down. She pulled off his shoes like she took mine off whenever I fell asleep reading on my bed or on the couch in the living room. She also covered him with a blanket and closed the door, then motioned for me to follow her down the hallway and into the kitchen. My Mom was quiet again and gave me dinner. She had a cup of weak tea and a slice of bread before she put dinner on a tray and took it to their room. This routine and the one where she sits in the middle of their bed and strokes his hair as he keeps his whole body turned away from her replaced the evening radio. I listened by myself or not at all. Soon, my Mom asked me to keep it off because the noise bothered my Dad.

This is the scariest thing: I woke up one night to hear my Dad yelling. Maybe it was a dumb thing to do, but I ran to their room and he had his hands around my Mom's throat, yelling that she should get her goddamn white ass back to Germany and stay there. I started yelling, too, because I didn't know what else to do. I came closer and tried to get my fingers under his hands so my Mom could breathe. It was fast when he let her go. He scrambled away like a dog does when he thinks you're angry. My Mom sat up and rubbed her throat, coughing and breathing and crying. My Dad sat in the corner all huddled up in a ball with his hands over his face. *Go back to bed*, said my Mom.

I didn't know how long I was supposed to go to school and over to Laura's house without saying anything. I started going home instead of to Laura's. One day, I just told her that I had to go to my house and I went there, found the extra key under the potted plant by the front door, and let myself in. I walked straight back to my Dad's room and started doing my homework. He was in the bed, like always, and he didn't look at me except for small glances he must have thought I didn't see. I kept working and I wouldn't look at him either, except for the same small looks. My Mom came home and saw me in there, but she only asked what I wanted for dinner. I said that I'd have whatever my Dad was having. I made sure to say MY DAD nice and loud. He shrank a little under the

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covers.

After dinner that one day, I stacked our dishes on our trays and put them by the door. That became the new routine, me eating with my Dad. I also quit going to Laura's most days and went home to do my work in their room. He would start to look at me longer but he never said anything. I asked my Mother if he spoke to her at all and she said, *Not much, not much* and went back to sorting through bills.

This is the way it still is. My Mom comes home from the recycling plant and does housework and cooks dinner. I see Laura at school and on weekends, but during the school week, I go home and stay in the bedroom. I found out that someone started coming during the day to look after him because my Mom couldn't keep coming home from the plant. Too much gas. And there is still a war going on.

This person, who had a uniform and a bag with the U.S. Army emblem on them, was supposed to be a psychiatric nurse. That's what my Mom told me. I think she was a babysitter. I never needed one, but apparently, this person is doing some good because my Dad will sit up in bed more often instead of just to eat. He will watch me steadily as I do my schoolwork and he and my Mother can at least touch like friends. Maybe next time I ask my Mom if he talks to her, she can say something like *Yes, sometimes*. or *He's getting better*. That's what I would like to hear.

--Dianna Craig '03