

Chapter 1

I didn't know the war was about to begin. I slept as serenely as any child asleep in the cool fall weather. When the phone rang in the middle of the night, I answered with the words my grandfather had drilled into me: "The Wallace Residence; this is Ben speaking. May I ask who is calling?" This was rote, a sign I was still asleep, unaware that a call in the middle of the night was either a wrong number or a disaster. When my grandfather had a heart attack while I was still in high school, my grandmother had called in the middle of the night. I still slept. If I'd known who was on the other line, I would've let it go to the answering machine.

"PFC Ben Wallace?" The voice was a woman's, although I'm not sure why I thought this. She could have been a teenager playing a prank on me. She had an official-sounding Southern inflection in her voice. In the U.S. Army, to say something in a Southern manner is to speak with authority. Everyone in the army, no matter where they originally came from—Belize, Skykomish, wherever—acquired a Southern inflection when they were in charge. This was the kind of thing some prankster would likely pick up on.

"May I please speak to PFC Wallace?" she asked. "This is Lieutenant Erickson."

My hands felt heavy and swollen. I blinked. “Hello?” the voice asked again. It was a teenage boy’s or a young woman’s—in any case, I had never heard this voice before. The voice asked for my name and rank. My greasy waiter clothes lay heaped in the hallway outside of the bathroom; I looked at the open paperback, *Remo Lives*, facedown on my nightstand. Dust had collected in the trough of the spine. The window was open a crack, letting in the early morning sound of the pine boughs moving in the drizzly wind, someone trying to start a car down the street, and the far-off rumble of a jet falling toward the airport. I was, last time I checked, a civilian. I was a reservist, a citizen soldier—heavy on the *citizen*.

“Ma’am, it’s the middle of the night. Can you call back tomorrow?”

“I’m calling to let you know you have to report for duty on Saturday at six hundred hours.” I had never received a phone call from my Army Reserve unit before. The time I did spend at drill, I had mapped out pretty well. I spent those days jogging and working out at the Madigan VA Hospital gym. After muster, I took a two-hour nap in the front seat of my car and then went back inside, had lunch, talked to the soldiers I drilled with for another hour. Then I took a swim, was dismissed, and drove directly to my job as a waiter at Red Robin Gourmet Burger Emporium. I worked the Saturday night closing shift. When I finished my shift, I went home and slept for four hours and then got up and did the whole thing again. I had plans to go to a private university in the fall, using military money and tip money.

“I don’t drill this weekend,” I told the woman. As I said this, I noticed how my arm looked in the blue light coming from the car repair shop behind the apartment building. Tall streetlights poked over the top of the wall, and their light shone down through my window into my apartment. Normally, I kept the venetian blinds turned tight so that I could sleep, but tonight I’d fallen asleep

without adjusting them. I flexed my muscle and noticed that my bicep had a new point to it, and that when I flexed, a tightly knotted ball of rope cinched my arm.

“I can’t drill this weekend. I’m already on the schedule at work. I’m on the board. I have to go in. No one is going to cover me.”

“I’m giving you a direct order, Private. Muster is not optional.”

“I’m not on duty right now. Work is a little more of a priority to me, a paycheck, than showing up for drill.”

“This is not a drill, PFC; report for call on Saturday morning or you will be reported AWOL to the MPs.”

“What do you mean?”

“The balloon has gone up. I have about thirty other people on my call list. I want to get some sleep tonight.”

“This isn’t a drill?”

“The balloon has gone up.” Lieutenant Erickson didn’t say this with a shrill edge in her voice. She said it plainly. She didn’t say it with the irony reservists normally used for the phrase since it had an end-of-the-world meaning to it. It had the same overblown quality as plagues, locusts, famine, intercontinental ballistic missiles hurtling their black-and-white checkered cones toward major metropolitan areas. The balloon had gone up. We had been called to war.

I wrote the directions to a base at Discovery Park in Seattle, a base I hadn’t even known was there. I hung up the phone, climbed back into bed, and lay completely still in an approximation of sleep, waiting for the alarm to tick.

I recalled something about the Middle East. The countries didn’t mean much to me because they all had new names. They weren’t referred to as Arabia and Persia the way they did in storybooks. They had names like Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, and Iran. They were all over there, somewhere. I had deliberately not paid attention to a single thing in the news, even though as a reservist, I might theoretically get called. Before the phone call I really believed that an activation

of the Army Reserve was only hypothetical. The reserves had not been called since World War II. In Vietnam, in fact, the reserves had been a good place to hide from the war. The draft dodgers were the ones who were now in charge of my reserve unit.

I wanted to call Jin. She would be asleep. I could leave a message on her answering machine, but according to her mother I was only allowed to leave one message a day. I didn't want to call until she was awake.

Lying in the darkness, I realized I had two choices. I could make the best of it, or I could fight it. My grandfather had made the best of it when it happened to him. He had been drafted for World War II. He said war was the best thing that was ever forced on him, because it was the worst thing. And once you get past the worst thing, it's all gravy.

Or I could fight it like my father had. My grandfather said that my father running to Canada in the late sixties to avoid his obligation to the war was the worst thing that had ever happened to my father.

I looked at the shadows shift on the wall. The light pushed light through the blinds and drapes. Wind blew loose objects against the Dumpsters outside, a flapping and knocking clatter. I liked getting up this early and moving through the neighborhood. The air smelled clear, having come from the far south or from the mountains. During the day the air didn't smell like this—it smelled of bus exhaust, engine oil, and lingering cigarette smoke.

I hadn't signed up to actually go to war.

Oddly, I felt liberated. What war? I didn't know there was a war. I knew there was some trouble in the Middle East. There was always trouble in the Middle East. There was always armed conflict somewhere. I had somehow become enmeshed in something beyond my control. I felt tricked. But, because I had been tricked, I was relieved of any responsibility. I would go to the war. I would leave

everything behind in Seattle and go there, though I didn't even know where "there" was. I had been asleep, and when I went to sleep I had planned to wake, when I would be a waiter at Red Robin, a student at Highline Community College, and the next day would be planned to the half hour. In the middle of the night, this had shifted. Instead of knowing almost exactly what would happen in my future, I knew nothing.

In the morning, I still wanted to call Jin, but it was too early. I didn't like to think of her as my girlfriend because that wasn't sufficiently clear about how I felt about her. I was certain she didn't feel the same way about me. She had talked about her future, and her future didn't include any kind of plausible narrative that included me. She talked about medical school. She wanted to intern in an urban hospital in Philadelphia or Baltimore, places that seemed as far away as possible. She said, "Wallace, you worry too much. Who knows what's going to happen? It'll all work out."

Maybe I was a practice boyfriend or something. That makes her sound coldhearted, but Jin wasn't cold. I'd thought she was too cool when we first started to go out. I'd just come back from Basic Training. I hadn't seen her since we were partners in chemistry as sophomores. When she saw me, she said, "You've grown."

Grown or not, I didn't feel grown-up then and now I had become aware of a flutter deep inside my stomach whenever I thought about her. I thought about Jin. I worried about when I might see her next. When she went to a cast party after a play and didn't tell me where she was, I left five messages on her machine.

"Five messages?" Jin asked. "You're not going to show up in my bedroom in the middle of the night? Are you psycho? A lunatic leaves three messages. Five?"

I might be a lunatic. I didn't know. No one had given me the appropriate scale. "I thought maybe you didn't get my message?"

"My mother is not happy about those messages," she said. "If it

was me, I'd probably still date you even if you are a psycho—just as long as you were, on your meds and could come up with brilliant mathematical theorems.”

“I was trying to reach you.”

“My mother doesn't like the answering machine. But my dad thinks we have to have it. What if there's an emergency?”

“It's only for emergencies?”

“If you leave five messages, it sounds urgent.”

“I call. The answering machine comes on. It beeps. I need to say something.”

Before this had happened, I had already begun to worry about my general tendency to get obsessed. I wondered if my thoughts about Jin were just a symptom, or they were real. Maybe I was just a passionate guy? I wondered if it marked me as some kind of pathological type. If Jin dumped me, how would I deal with it? Would I break into her house, stuff her into the trunk of my Nova, and drive to the abandoned prospector's cabin I had picked out in the Central Cascades in a pretty valley full of old fir trees where we could make a new life together, free of the petty rules of the land? Not that I hadn't thought of it. A lot. The thought of using a shrink ray and shrinking her down into a miniature person and placing her in one of those capsules that hold twenty-five-cent trinkets in the supermarket vending machines calmed the fluttering movement that occurred somewhere behind my belly button. I had to imagine possessing her, the way I owned a watch or book, just to calm myself down. I wanted to know, was this normal? Or was there something seriously wrong with me? Maybe I just wasn't mature. It could just be a sign of an unformed nervous system.

At first, I didn't know what I thought about having a girlfriend. I didn't know anything about where Jin's family came from. She was Chinese-American. She was born in Tukwila. But her mother and father came from Mainland China. Her father worked as a

geneticist, and whenever I saw him, he smiled tightly and quickly looked away. He seemed old, but had jet-black hair and wore a blue oxford and pair of crumpled brown trousers. He spent his evenings on the wooden porch of their house, taking all evening to drink a single can of beer and chain-smoke a pack of cigarettes. He read Chinese novels.

Jin's mother, on the other hand, hurried to the kitchen to begin making food when I showed up. Jin usually made sure we left as quickly as possible because she said her Mom wouldn't rest until I was out of the house.

I didn't join the Army Reserve to fight in a war. No one joins the Army Reserve to fight in a war. If you're itching to stick your bayonet into the enemy, you join the regular army and work your way into an elite unit like the Rangers. The closest I came to an actual military-style experience was when my basic training first sergeant lined my company up in a field full of locusts one day. It was late morning, but the red soil already held the sun's heat. The bugs clicked in the dry grass. We folded our blouses into neat squares and lay them on the dusty earth, scaring locusts up. It's funny but we called the shirts to our uniforms *blouses*. They whirred above the heads of our company like popcorn blown from a popper. The sergeant talked us through hand-to-hand combat moves.

"Most likely the only time you're ever going to get into a brawl will be when you're in some bar you are not supposed to be in. Army boys always win. The reason we win," he shouted, "is what I'm about to show you. You have only one blow. You need to make that blow as rapidly and decisively as you can make it." He showed us how to place the ball of our hand under the enemy's jaw. He used that word, *enemy*, and the phrase kept going through my head after that: "the enemy." We paired up and then practiced, throwing our hands up and kicking up clouds of bitter-tasting dust. I wanted to try this maneuver out; on the march to the mess hall that night, I

thought about the day I might get to use my move. It wasn't likely to happen anytime soon, since I was a 92 Bravo, a laboratory technician.

During my induction into the reserves, I was asked a number of questions about my beliefs: whether I was a pacifist, whether I believed in the justice of the death penalty. At seventeen, my feelings about these things were hardly articulate. I didn't know how I felt about them. I knew what I had been told about them. I didn't think a person should kill another person. I also knew war was something that happened. A lot of things happened that I didn't want to believe happened. Whether I believed in them or not, they would happen. In a war, I would aim my rifle at the enemy and I would pull my trigger. I would jump from my foxhole, and I would strike as quickly as possible, laying the ball of my palm into my enemy's neck. I believed there were armies and there were enemies and that people killed their enemies. Whatever I believed didn't matter very much; things were what they were no matter what I believed. I was as willing as the next person to get into fights, eat meat, and perform actions that resulted, somewhere beyond me, in death. I was an American. The only sure thing, as far as I could tell, was that I was entitled to my hunger even if I was full.

But I didn't join the reserves with any premeditated desire to see a war, kill anyone, or have anything directly to do with the death and destruction that resulted from my desire for ground meat. I was far happier allowing all this to happen somewhere else. I joined the Army Reserve for these reasons: I wanted money for college, and I wanted to piss off my dad and please my grandpa.

In the six months I'd been going to the Highline Athletic Club, Sandy always arrived before me. No matter how early I woke, he was already there. He came to the club after his job as a night janitor cleaning office buildings downtown. He was amped up at the end of his day. He was strung out on coffee. He drank huge

amounts from the water bottle he filled with ice and coffee.

Sandy was the first person I made friends with after coming back from the army. I had moved out to Seattle from Cle Elum, and I didn't know anyone. Everyone had graduated a year before me and cleared off to different parts of the country. Everyone I knew from east of the mountains didn't want to go to Seattle. If they were going to a city, they went to Spokane or Portland or San Francisco. Seattle was too close and didn't seem exotic enough to them. In high school we'd come over the mountains and eat from the strange fast-food places there—hamburger chains you could only find in Seattle, teriyaki, and other things. If a person were going to the trouble of moving, why go to Seattle? I never committed to anything whole hog, I guess.

First thing, I joined the athletic club near my house and started working out before I went to work. I still woke at the crack of dawn. Just after my army training, waking up at five o'clock seemed like sleeping in. I was used to getting up and moving before I could possibly be awake, and so I would wake up and begin to move; the morning after the call came in, after the balloon had gone up, I didn't even think. I slipped into my sweatpants, grabbed my book bag and the clothes I'd prepared for the day, and took off. I didn't think about it. What was there to think about? I could think during the weekend. I had set everything out on the weekend and now it was ready, and since I didn't have time to think, I didn't have to think, and so I didn't think.

I sat in my car. A fine rain like liquid talc settled from the low clouds, coming down as it always did in the early hours before the sun rose. Even if the day were going to be hot, it would have this faint rain at five o'clock in the morning. The streets were silent because no one went anywhere at five o'clock in the morning except prep cooks. I pulled into the lot at the athletic club. One of their things was that they were open all night long. There was

always some high school kid at the front desk that they'd tricked into working from three in the morning to the start of school, and he would be drinking coffee, half-asleep. There were a few moms working the treadmills and bicycle machines.

The weight rooms always smelled of rubber mats and the ferric tang of plates. The few lifters labored through their routines. Sandy drank his iced coffee and stretched. That is what he did before I arrived. Sandy stretched, and he tried out new lifts that he then would teach to me. I was pretty conservative when it came to lifting weights. I preferred the real power lifts that concentrated on the long muscles: bench press, squat, incline bench, dead lift, clean and jerk. I would rotate through my muscle groups and then hit the stomach; and then I'd spend a half-hour in the sauna drinking Sandy's brew and sweating while he and I talked. Only after we had gone through our routine did Sandy actually start to get tired.

In addition to his janitorial work, Sandy was a professional role-playing gamer. He ran several games and people paid for a seat at them. He ran his game out of the back of a hobby shop near the athletic club. The beauty of his game, as he described it, was that it occurred in a fully simulated environment that continued to evolve even if people weren't playing the game. The game developed at a slightly faster rate than real time. A week might pass in real life, and a year might pass in the game. He ran a computer program that advanced the weather, calculated the inflation rate, and caused various political developments. In his game, the discovery of a horde of dragons could result in rapid inflation. A loaf of bread rise from the cost of a brass to a gold piece. He prepared a newspaper, environmental reports, and price lists for his games each week.

After working out, Sandy would go home to sleep, and then around eleven o'clock he'd wake up and work on his world, updating rate tables and modifying index sheets. Then he'd go and conduct one of his weekly games in the middle of the day.

“The balloon has gone up, Sandy.” I told him this right when he was about to go down with the weight racked on his back, so he had the entire cycle of the squat to think about it. He had already shifted the weight off the bar. He had it up on his shoulders across his back. Sandy believed in the power of the grunt. Sandy looked directly into his face in the mirror. He curled his lips. He exposed one yellow tooth, almost black at the edge of the gum. Going down into seven hundred and fifty pounds of steel, his eyes rolled forward in his head. They didn’t bug out. Sandy said that even if he could lift more weight, a bug-eyed weight lifter didn’t deserve any medals, didn’t deserve the gift of strength. Vigor required discipline. A lack of discipline resulted in bug eyes and meant the lifter probably didn’t have the endurance to wake up and go to the gym week after week, month after month, because only that resulted in strength. Some study showed that of all sports, only weight lifting could increase the confidence of all the participants. Everyone could find a measure of success in lifting metal against gravity. Other sports had winners, but they also made losers. Nothing else resulted in strength. Eating protein helped, but it didn’t result in strength. Taking steroids didn’t help; they resulted in a reliance on something aside from discipline—and that meant you were not strong. Strength required endurance and time and the development of muscle. This was discipline.

Sandy and I referred to the slow burn at the end of the routine as the “Arms of Fire.”

When he finished, he looked at me. “About fucking time, man. Maybe you’ll learn something. I sure in hell hope you get to see some action.”

“I’m a lab technician,” I said.

“I hear hospitals can be brutal during a war. This is a land war in Asia.”

“A land war in Asia!” That was a punch line to a joke.

I was never particularly good at schoolwork. I didn't do poorly. I read the books assigned. I worked through my assignments because I'd been told to do them. I was considered a good student, but "good" in that I was pliant and turned in my homework on time. I kept a three-ring binder, as instructed, with individual tabs for each class. I pressed the metal tabs and the metal prongs open with an audible snap, and I fitted my three-hole-punched notebook sheets into place. I reviewed my notes each evening while I worked on my homework. I never excelled. I earned Bs and the occasional A from teachers who graded on completeness and timeliness. I figured it took just a certain amount of effort just to get by.

I joined some other students in a calculus class study group. As soon as we got together, they wanted to play poker instead of work through the quadratic equations. I left to do my homework. "Wallace," one kid said, "do it in the morning like everyone else."

"But it can take hours," I said.

"I don't let my homework take more than an hour," he said. "If I can't wake up before school and do it while I drink my coffee, I don't do it."

I spent the next several days thinking about this. I timed myself, and after an hour I still had more work. I woke in the morning and drank coffee. I didn't like the taste of coffee. I followed the directions on the tin. Then I cracked open my book and started working through the problems. The school day started, and I was still drinking coffee and working on my problems. I missed the day and had to work on my homework that night.

Just as I didn't excel in school, I didn't play sports because I never stood out in any way. In sports, everyone was supposed to stand out for some reason. Everyone was supposed to find his talent. In my case, I was a monotonously average player. For several years I played soccer, but my playing peaked in the fourth grade, when I was selected as one of three players to attend a soccer camp. I was

selected because I had steadfastly followed the coach's instructions, and the majority of the other players had just run around doing stunts like making goals with a head-butt or taking five-yard-long sliding tackles.

I was never good at stunts; somewhere around the sixth grade, other kids learned how to follow the rules when it was necessary and get away with doing whatever they wanted to do when no one was looking.

I discovered the weight room one morning when I came to school early to run stairs. I wanted to try out for the wrestling team and dreaded the tryouts. Months before they happened, I started to run stairs in my house, but all we had was a flight of six steps down into the basement. I came to school to run long flights of stairs.

As I left the empty locker room that morning, I saw one of the football players, a pimply and overweight boy who never actually played on the field. He was wearing his jersey and sweatpants. I followed him onto the cement patio next to the parking lot and the school greenhouse, where the biology glass was replicating Gregor Mendel's genetic experiments with planters of peas. The door to the weight room was held open by a rusted hunk of steel. The rumbling thud of heavy metal came from the room. A number of boys from wrestling and football and a few girls I recognized from the gymnastics team quietly worked at various stations. They were all concentrating and didn't even look up as I came in. A football player stood on a mat and yanked up a barbell. Actually, it wasn't that he yanked the weight; rather, his entire body became a coil, and the metal flew into the air, and he somehow fell under the barbell and caught it. The plates sang as they clattered back together. The lifter dropped the weight back to his thighs and then set it on the ground and repeated the entire motion. Everyone was quietly occupied at his work. I found a chart on the wall and began to lift weights. The boy I'd followed into the room was lifting weights at

the squat station. Although he was someone who always talked in class, here he quietly began to work.

The chart on the wall had two routines for increasing strength. One chart covered the upper body, and the other focused on the legs. Each lift had a diagram showing how to do it, and they all looked simple. I did the lifts for my arms, careful not to lift too much weight.

Afterward, I felt tired, and clearheaded the way I did after I ran stairs. I could tell I had done something, but I wasn't sure what it was. Later in the day, I began to feel my strained muscles in a way I hadn't felt before. I became aware of muscles I didn't even know I had, because they hurt.

My shoulders ached the next morning. It felt as if I had pulled my bones apart. I limped to school and lifted the weights on the other side of the chart. By the time I was done lifting on this side, the pain in my arms had subsided to a dull ache. I felt oddly burned up and at peace with myself. I became aware of a kind of anxiety that was there all the time, as if I should be doing something but I didn't know what it was.

The next day was the worst that it would ever get. My legs and arms were both sore, and I could barely get to school and sit down at my desk. After a few days, though, the pain faded. I kept visiting the weight room.

Unlike just about anything else, I found that I improved. At first, I lifted weights that were pretty much what anyone could lift. After three months I was lifting the same weights as the football players. By the end of the summer I could lift more than anyone in the school had lifted before. It was just a matter of steady, patient attendance. I showed up and lifted my weights, just like I showed up and did my homework. But unlike my homework, I began to do things other people couldn't do. Talent hadn't chosen me. I just showed up day after day to lift.

I parked in an old drive-in movie theater called Midway that held a vast swap meet during the weekends on the undulating pavement. Thin lanes led up to parking spots on an embankment for the ideal angle. Microphones rusted in the rain. Everyone who went to the community college parked in the old stalls during the week, taking the spots closest to the door first, and gradually spreading out across the lot until the last spots were taken and people had to park on the gravel road behind Midway. Cattails grew in the ditch there; in the middle of the swampy field the Washington State Department of Transportation kept their snowplows and road graders. I parked in the middle of Midway and looked up at the white movie screen. It was too light now for it to get any use, with Highway 99 and I-5 right next to it, but there was still something pleasant about the vast, blank screen.

I had to leave all of this. A windbreak of cottonwoods stood between the movie theater and the road. Their swollen roots had pushed up the cement sections of the sidewalk to mismatched angles. By the time I crossed the Midway parking lot, I was walking with the pack of 8:30 a.m. students over Pacific Highway South and down the new, slightly soft asphalt bicycle trail to the campus. The community college had thick, green lawns and rhododendrons and cedar trees. To me the campus seemed like a retiree's luxuriant backyard. Totem poles sat in the middle of stands of cedar trees. Chimes tinkled from under the portables' awnings. The buildings themselves were essentially thick wood frames and glass. For a community college with bustling students getting ready for their afternoon jobs, it seemed all right; it seemed as though this was how things should be, rather than the ornate cement Gothic campus at the University of Washington. The university had terra cotta gargoyles just as a McDonald's had vanilla milkshakes.

I didn't know a single person on the campus besides my instructors. There was a girl in biology who kept ending up as my lab partner.

She wore her long brown or blondish hair—depending on the sunlight—in a ponytail and wore sweaters and pale blue jeans and new running shoes with huge, bulbous soles. She smiled at me when I saw her on campus. When we worked on experiments in biology, she leaned forward and wrote notes with a pink mechanical pencil in her spiral notebook. She'd written the class name and section number on the cover in a bleeding black marker. Sometimes she stopped and gouged the paper, leaving a tear when the lead ran out. She said “fuck” softly, and then unzipped a compartment on her backpack and removed a plastic case with replacement leads lined up like bullets.

I think her name was Sarah.

My first class took place in the last classroom overlooking the gully that ran behind the school, a deep chasm with storm-drain runoff gurgling from somewhere under the blackberry bushes and salmonberries. Nature trails ran through the greenbelt. None of the female students would travel along the nature trails, because for several years female students had vanished while jogging along the trail or hitting the various exercise stations. Streamers of moss now hung from the pull-up bar. Each station had a padding of crushed cedar shavings, and in October between class and work I'd take my lunch bag down into the leafy greenbelt and sit on the sit-up bar and listen to the bird calls and the stream, or rather storm-drain runoff, gurgle in its bed of crushed cement blocks that had come from the apartment building that once stood where the campus now did.

I sat in my History of the Ancient World class taught by a man who wore blue jeans and sandals, even in the rain. A scarab hung from a cord necklace. He pressed the scarab into the gap under his Adam's apple as he talked to us about the Sumerians. He explained the agricultural explosion in the fifth millennium BCE.

After class, I told him that I had to withdraw. “My unit has been activated for the war.”

I followed him to the instructors' annex, up a flight of stairs. His office smelled slightly of the outdoors, mildew, alder, and rotting leaves. A moth tapped his door like a damp wood-chip and bounced. African tribal totems and pieces of stone from digs stuffed every shelf.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, you're getting called up for this Arabian Gulf thing."

"Desert Shield," I said.

"Everything is happening in Kuwait?"

"I don't know where I'm going."

"Baghdad has really good whores. As good as Rome."

"What?"

"So I've heard. You have to stop in Egypt too. They've got Greek whores there."

"I don't know where I'm going."

"Greek *and* African."

"I might not even leave the U.S. I'm in the reserves, obviously."

"Have you ever had *quat*? If you're in the region, go to Egypt—you won't be sorry. It's a pity I can't go with you. I could show you a time; yes, I could. A time indeed. But I'm stuck here grading the work of morons. Sorry. Present company excluded, of course."

We looked out his window down into the gurgling space of the gully choked with fir trees behind the school.

I could call Jin and she might answer. I grabbed my gym bag because I needed to have my routine, and if my routine varied, I didn't know how to get through the day. I needed to do one thing and then the next thing and, if I called Jin, I would want to drop everything to figure out where this put us. The first thing she would do was get mad. I'd have to deal with this. She had a list, and her dating me broke some of her rules.

"I never date men in the military," she'd said.

“For how many men have you even had that as an option?” I asked.

“You’re the first one.”

“So you could have been with me or without me?”

“I also don’t date weight lifters.”

“I’m a bodybuilder,” I had said. “I don’t *just* lift weights.”

“What does that mean?”

“There is a certain art to what I’m doing.”

“It’s like performance?” she asked.

“I like to think of it as sculpture.”

“That is precisely why I had that particular item on my list. I didn’t want to date a dude who works on himself as if he’s a piece of clay.”

“We are all unformed,” I’d said. “It takes a certain will to make something happen to our raw material.”

“I should have followed my list.”

But I called her anyway. The phone rang, and then I was committed. She didn’t answer on the second ring, and I was sure then that she wouldn’t answer, that her phone was off. Finally it came to her message. “Name and number after the beep.” Even though the message didn’t have any substance, she said it in a cheerful way.

“This is Ben,” I said. “Call me at work when you can.”

Before work, I ordered the fettuccine Alfredo and changed into my white shirt and blue chinos and read the paper, careful to avoid the sections about Operation Desert Shield. I sat in the break room: a red table in a cubicle of corkboard covered in company notices on fluorescent paper and posters for bands the cooks played in. The kitchen staff all played in bands. The artistically inclined waiters were either actors or in bands. One of the day cooks was in a band that had started getting airplay on the AM rock station at the far end of the dial, Z Rock, and everyone had started asking him for

advice. His band had just signed with a record label. He came to work with this faraway look, as if he were already gone, ascended to the stadium stage. He was a short man with long, dark hair he kept rolled up into his hairnet. He'd been moved off the line and had started preparing the burgers, arranging the food in the basket, because everyone saw him as an artist now.

He came into the room now to change into his work clothes. He looked at me and didn't say anything. When he came out of the changing room, I told him.

"They called me up for the war."

"What war?"

"Operation Desert Shield."

"That's not a war," he said.

He stood in the break room holding his long fingers up to his jaw. He rocked slightly on the balls of his feet, getting ready to jump.

"They called me last night and said I had to go."

"They can't just call anyone like that. Can they?"

"I'm in the Army Reserve."

"Well, what are you bitching about? You joined to fight, right? You joined to pick up your gun and go out there and blow some motherfuckers away for peace, liberty, and justice for fucking all."

"I didn't join to kill anyone."

"Look," he shifted his weight. "I got to get going, or they'll kick my punk ass out right now."

"I joined for the money," I said to him as he walked away. I turned back and looked at a moving sale flier, and I thought, "here I was, a young man, and they had really handed me this thing, this war."

I went outside into the foggy drizzle, and I walked out to the railroad tracks as I thought about it. People who went to war were warriors. I could be a warrior. I could kick some ass, I thought.

While I bussed my tables after the dinner rush, I told my news to the floor manager, a woman who'd just graduated from business school and spent most days sitting on a stool watching the movement of the night waiters. The shift had gone smoothly because only businessmen and sedate retired couples came in on Thursdays. They wanted their food quickly and hot, maybe a drink or two, and then they left big tips. I'd earned a bunch of money for three hours. I bussed, and then I told the boss.

"I've been activated."

"Someone's always pressing your buttons," she said.

"They called me up."

"You've heard the word," she said, and then she stopped smiling.

"What are you talking about?"

"My reserve unit was activated for Operation Desert Shield."

"What?" She swept her hair away from her ear, as if to hear better. "What does that mean?"

"It means I'm going to go to the war," I said.

"If there is a war," she said. "They might not have one."

"There might not be one," I said. "But I have to report for muster this weekend in any case."

"Muster?"

"I stand in formation, and they call out my name and I say, 'Here, sergeant.'"

"I didn't know what to do," I said. "I didn't know where to go. Something like that happens, and you think, did I even sign up for this? I signed up for the Army Reserve, not the real military. I signed up for one weekend a month."

"But with the understanding that in a time of crisis they would call you up."

"Is this a crisis? It doesn't seem like a crisis."

"If they called you up," she said, "it must be a crisis."

"They say it's a crisis, but who trusts them?"

“Still, they called you up.”

“I won’t be able to come in next week. I’m sorry for such short notice.”

“I’m shocked you even came in today.”

“They just called me last night.”

“And you start on Saturday.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I start on Saturday.” *Start*, like it was a job or something. It wasn’t even a job: it was, as they say, an adventure.

I broke down some boxes left by the restaurant Dumpster and took them home and then began to pack. I folded everything, and then I started looking for my military gear, which I had in a trunk and a duffel bag at the back of my closet. Soon I had everything packed and folded. I kept two plates out and some silverware. I could have the greatest experience in my life. I could rise to the challenge and become a great warrior unlike any of the soft boys who wandered around the mall, drooling. I could test my strength on the field of battle.

At eleven o’clock, when Jin’s rehearsal finished, I drove back to the college. I parked in the lot and walked into the theater. Jin stood under the cover of the backstage entrance with her drama cronies. I smiled at them, and Jin gave me this look: *Don’t say anything*. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t say how much I hated smoking or anything. I just stood there, out in the middle of the driveway, looking at her until she saw something was wrong, and then she and I walked back to the car.

She kissed me, leaving behind a ghost smudge of lipstick.

“Where do you want to go?” she asked me.

“I don’t have any plans. Back to the apartment?”

“Do you want to know what I’m going to tell you?”

“You’ll tell me when you tell me.”

“I don’t think I’ll tell you. You’re in one of those moods,” she said.

“Boys always say that about girls. If you don’t have moods, I don’t have moods.”

She leaned across the seat and kissed me again.

I pulled through the cloverleaf and stopped at a stoplight. A man wheeled a shopping cart over the overpass. He had built a tent over the wire frame out of plastic bags and a packing pallet. He wore a gray blanket as a turban.

“It’s a cold night,” Jin said.

“They said it might snow,” I said.

“I heard that. But what do they know?”

“They never know when it might snow,” I said.

“I didn’t get my period this month,” she said.

The light turned green. The rain was greasy on the windshield. I turned on the fluid, and it sprayed frothy cleaner over the car window.

“Does that mean you’re pregnant?”

“You’d think,” she said.

“Did you take a test?”

“No.” She shrugged and brushed her long black hair from her face. “I didn’t plan it.”

“This is great,” I said. “I can’t believe it.”

“Unexpected is for sure,” she said.

“I’m going to be a dad!” I almost felt like crying. I would be a dad. Jin and I would be together forever. Even if she divorced me sometime, she would still be with me, because once two people have a child together, they are *locked* together. There was nothing she could do about it. I would always be the father of her child.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I might *not* be pregnant.”

“You were smoking.” As I said this, I knew it was not the thing I should say. I felt an urge to protect the baby, if there were a baby, inside her. It was mine as much as it was hers. This I knew, but at the same time I couldn’t understand the extension of myself I

suddenly felt. Part of myself that was not myself was growing inside of her.

“Whoever said I’m going to have a baby? I might not even be pregnant. I’ve been late before,” she said.

“We’ll figure it out,” I said. “This is a lot to think about. We’ll get a test. We’ve got to know.”

“There isn’t that much to figure out,” she said.

I parked in the parking lot and we climbed the stairs and she looked around at my packed apartment.

“What’s going on here?”

“The balloon has gone up,” I said.