Random Happy Thoughts

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“If I have said it once I have said it a thousand times. The Army takes way to long to do anything.” I smiled over to an elderly soldier sitting next to me. “I just need to see my case manager to get her to check a box, and I have been sitting here for what seems like decades.” It had only been about two hours since I had arrived at the medical checkout building that bright Thursday morning. But I had spent the entire time sitting on some metal folding chairs outside a back office.

“I know what you mean. I was your age when I first got here.” He joked. “You think they would have streamlined this process already.”

“So you have been here thirty years?” I continued. “But yeah preparing for deployment is almost as hard as the deployment itself.”

“You’ve been over there before?” He asked. “Yeah once in ’04. Iraq. No big deal. You too?”

“Yeah ’06. So what bring you to Fort Hood’s slow moving hell?”

“Well, I had to see a doctor about my paperwork. Someone filled out the wrong line back then, and I just had to meet with someone to prove that I had all of my limbs or something like that. Basic Army bullshit if you ask me.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. As I was calling it bullshit I noticed he was a Sergeant Major.

“Yeah. Well good luck to ya!” He smiled, putting me at my ease. “I fear you could grow old in that chair.”

Just as he finished speaking a string of fireworks exploded in rapid succession near the front door. The concrete outer walls of the building held in the noise, and the cubicle walls did a poor job muting the cacophony.

“What the hell is this?” He grumbled.

“This better not be a drill.” I was annoyed that they would be playing war games with a bunch of soldiers preparing to go there.

“Wait. Get down!” He shouted leading by example.

I half crouched on one knee, still not certain I knew what was happening around me. I scanned the room, as people began to shout. Five foot cubicule walls divided the open floor into three rows of makeshift offices. As I watched the opening of my hallway a young soldier came flying around the corner. His eyes were blank and his uniform was stained. It took a moment before my mind realized that the stains were blood. I fell the rest of the way to the floor and pressed my body into it, trying to disappear. The cold linoleum pressed
against my cheek and sucked the warmth from my face. Little specs of dust danced innocently in the sunlight shining through the glass doors into the room.

Golden rays of the sun cascaded between slightly wafting curtains as my brother and I ran into the living room. Last night our father had brought home a VCR and a couple of movies. Our monthly video binge was about to occur. We lived on a large ranch and spent most of our time outside playing in the ravine or running through the woods, but once every month Dad would borrow a VCR from his job at the local Christian school and we would spend a whole day just watching our favorite movies.

Before I get too far, there are a few things you should know. First, when I say ‘ranch’ I mean ‘camp’; a camp we did not own — but were allowed to live there as caretakers—complete with buildings, outhouses, seven garages, one barn, a goat, twenty or more rabbits in cages, and at least fifteen cats. Second, my grandfather was the pastor at the local church, and the principle at my Christian school; about twenty percent of the nearly two hundred students who attended were related to me in some way. I even remember my grandmother substitute teaching my third grade class. Lastly, I had no idea that my father’s eight thousand dollar yearly salary put us below the poverty line, and we didn’t grow our vegetables for fun, we grew them so we could eat.

“Kids come get breakfast first.” Our mom called to us from the kitchen. Sprinting the thirty feet or so into the kitchen, our homemade footy pajamas lost traction on the linoleum floor, and we slid into our spots with the practiced accuracy of two five and six year old boys. Wolfing down the pancakes and the one-cup of juice that we were allowed on Saturdays, because it was too expensive to drink every day, we hurried back into the living room and threw ourselves down on the musty old couch, ready for a month's worth of movies in just one day. I constantly had to readjust my position as the springs of the old living room behemoth were constantly seeking out new ways to ruin my fleshy parts. I didn’t mind. It was about to begin. Our dad loaded the VCR and we sat back ready to indulge ourselves in some Old yeller, my brother’s favorite movie. We waited. Our dad hemmed and hawed. Our little sister, Nadia, cried because she was three and we were using the living room for something other than playing with her dolls.

The next moment broke my five-year-old conscience. The sun still played with the thin curtains. The couch still assaulted my back with the old rusty springs. The TV, however, was ablaze with tiny electronic ants marching all over a red screen, and making a loud job of it. Mom was saying something to us from the kitchen, but the only thing I heard was my dad’s ominous, “Looks like the VCR is broken.”

NO! It can’t be! I thought, Why did I have to watch Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles last night? I know that Jeremy wanted to watch Old Yeller, but I was selfish and I wanted to watch my movie. Now he is so sad and I feel terrible.
The room swirled around me causing everything to fade to various shades of gray. I ran out of that horrible living room, away from the flesh-eating couch, and into my room face down on my bed. Which, as I remember, wasn’t as easy as I wanted because I had the top bunk and Jeremy had the bottom because he was older and got everything he wanted? Everything except being able to watch Old Yeller; I took that from him. We would never be able to get another VCR, at least not until next month.

Another round of gunshots snapped me out of my reverie. If I can just work around this office I would have a clear path to the door. I shuffled back around more cubicles. The deliberate footsteps of the shooter doubled back. He was headed back to my hallway. New plan, if I can just stay out of sight; if I can just keep myself behind the office and not in the hall. I saw a fellow soldier dive into a back room behind concrete walls and a stout wooden door. Better yet, put some cover between me and him, not just concealment. The door slammed shut just as I reached it. I grabbed the cold metal of that handle-of-my-safety, my escape from the terror that was unfolding. It was locked. That door was my only chance at life, and I was locked out. I pulled down on the metal handle with everything I had in me; I nearly hung from it. Nothing. In that moment I was so close to death I could smell it — the sour stench of blood, the sulfur from the gunpowder, the sweat from fifty or so terrified people. Another soldier dressed in the Class A uniform ran past shouting something about how he was out of ammo. God I wish.

Gunshots once more echoed through the tiny prison this room had become, proving this little hope was a lie. Panicked soldiers scrambled around the cubicle walls of the makeshift offices, and climbed over my legs. The fear in their eyes reflected my own. Across the little hallway from me two soldiers lay under a desk. One was screaming and rocking, while the other was grabbing him around his chest and telling him he will be all right, when the shooting paused again the comforting soldier tried to silence the screamer, it was only then that I saw the blood on his uniform. Oh, he is not going to make it. That pain must be horrible. His eyes gleamed with a pain I could not imagine, and I had to look away.

“Get mom! Get mom! Get mom!” My older brother finally managed to form words through the agony. Shattering the silence of the summer afternoon. The look in his eyes scared me.

It was now around June when Jeremy and I were six and seven, and were playing in the backyard; we had received explicit instructions to stay away from the main buildings. A few of the owners arrived that morning and my mother was leading them through the camp to show them what we had done over the winter months. Looking back on that now, I can’t help but feel we were banished from the main grounds because my brother and I were terrible at

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cleaning up after ourselves, and our mother didn’t want a mess for the owners. So there we were, being good, breaking large sticks into smaller sticks, and throwing the pieces at local squirrels — all very peaceful and cheery.

As we were enjoying the quiet sunshine of a fine afternoon, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Nadia was on her way down to what we called the ‘printing house,’ probably because the owners had an ancient printing machine in there. For whatever the mysterious printing house contained, the outside was falling apart. Next to the ‘printing house’ was a large pile of debris — presumably wreckage from its slow decay — and a tree that produced those brown looking banana things we were not allowed to eat. Normally, we could do almost anything on the camp grounds — we could rummage thought the old barn, play cowboys and indians in the broken down bus (which was inhabited for 3 months out of the year) clamber down a large cliff into a ravine that had a struggling creek — but we were never allowed in the ‘printing house’ without an adult.

I pointed her out to Jeremy, and being the oldest and most responsible he headed down after her. She was only four at the time, so catching her was a laughably easy thing for the seven year old Jeremy. I kept breaking sticks and tossing them, fortunately my aim was terrible at long range, and the squirrels were smart enough to stay far away from me.

A scream caused my last throw to fly wildly off track; the stick sailed into the unknown, but before it landed I whipped around to investigate the noise. Jeremy had stepped on a bumblebee. Nadia ran back to the house; I stood frozen to my spot. The bumblebee hung from Jeremy’s toe by the stinger, (we never wore shoes) and he stumbled, crying, over to the cement porch off the back of our house dragging his foot the whole way trying to scrape the pain off like a pile of mud.

That is when he screamed and looked me in the eyes.

I quickly pulled on my hand-me-down socks because in my six-year-old mind socks were needed to leave the backyard. By the time I was almost to our mother, they were halfway off my feet and soaking.

‘The journey felt farther than the two hundred yards it was, but at last I reached my destination: the almost broken screen door of what we called ‘The white house;’ maybe because it was a house for some important people, or maybe because it happened to be white. I ripped it open, yelling.

“Mom! Jeremy is hurt bad.” I screamed into the darkness. The lights were off and trees surrounded the “white house,” so it was dark.

“Ben?” Our mother flipped on the light when she entered the room.

“Jeremy is hurt bad, come quick!” I stammered, out of breath.

I realize now that of all the terrible things that could have befallen two adventurous boys on a camp as vast as my childhood stomping grounds, a bumblebee sting didn’t even rank. She took off running back to where I left Jeremy and I could only struggle to keep pace.

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The pain was still evident in my older brother’s eyes when we reached the back of the house.

“What’s wrong?” Our mother half-yelled half cried.

Jeremy pointed at his toe.

“Hold still.” She instantly diagnosed what had happened because the stinger and half the bee were still stuck inside his toe.

She pulled it out with the care and precision of a well-trained surgeon and disappeared inside the house to get the weird brown paste that was supposed to pull out the bee poison. As she was finding the healing salve I sat on the bottom step of the porch, feeling a little upset that my socks were wet. That is when I found it. I saw the beast that wounded my brother, crawling in circles on its slow path to death. I immediately grabbed a stick and started poking it. Buzzing its broken wings in a vain attempt to retreat from my prodding, I ended its life with one final poke. I heard the small exoskeleton break and felt the soft insides splatter all over the porch. This bee will never hurt my family again. I smiled smugly to myself, the guardian of the family.

“Move! Move! Move!” A voice shouted at me.

I didn't bother to find out where the voice came from, or who was yelling. I obeyed the order. Crawling around the corner of a cubicle I saw the body of a young woman lying face down in a pool of blood. Her red hair disheveled around her, or was it blonde hair dyed red by her escaping life? It didn't matter. Not to me. Not anymore. Her face was one of about a dozen that I saw that day. Her eyes were blue, and staring at something near my ankles. The few freckles on her face were hard to distinguish from the blood that had splattered on her cheeks.

The folding chairs of the waiting area were a disheveled mess; half were laying on the ground the other half bent or askew. Some were even broken. They all somehow pointed to her body, and the one chair that was leaning on her back. For a moment I thought she may just be pretending or something so the shooter wouldn't come back. She was not. It is a subtle difference, but one that is immediately distinguishable between life and death; her back did not rise and fall with her breath.

Will I end up like her? More shots rang out, farther away this time. He is moving to the other side, ok if I can just get past this open area and out the door. The plan formed itself in my head.

“Hey, you gonna do it today!” The voice was back.

“Dad, is he gonna do it today?” I asked from the back seat.

“I don't know, I hope so.” He responded as he pulled in front of the long seven stall garage-barn.

A year or so after the bee incident, my father was driving the family back from AWANA, the Protestant version of Boy Scouts. It was a chilly Wednesday
night, and he had the Detroit Tigers game playing on the radio. Even though we lived in Pennsylvania, we had all been Tigers fans from birth.

“Swing and a drive to left, that ball is deep, and it is LONG GONE!” Ernie Harwell yells at us from the radio dial. “Number fifty on the season for the big man.”

“He did it! He did it!” I was so excited.

Never in my life had anything this amazing happened. At that moment, life was perfect. My father and I sat and listened to the WJR AM 760 broadcast of our favorite baseball team. Our white minivan and the star filled country sky was the backdrop for a moment of bonding between father and son. I was too young to realize that the Tigers were well below .500 for the season, and missed the playoffs by several games, and even if I did know, I wouldn’t care. Cecil Fielder had just hit his fiftieth home run of the season, and we were beating the Yankees. I was certain that this night could not get any better. As it turned out it could.

Top of the ninth, it was the Tigers last at-bat for the game, and for the season, Cecil Fielder back to the plate. Chills crept down my spine.

“Everyone was talking about fifty, no one said anything about fifty-one.” Ernie commented.

“Do you think he can dad?”

“I think he can, I just don’t know if he will.”

“It would be so awesome if he did.” I smiled and rested my head on the back of the bench seat.

“That ball is hit hard. And…it…is…LONG GONE! He did it, number fifty-one!”

I lost control. My hero, or at least my hero until the Pistons started playing again, had come through. He was the best thing to happen to baseball. A Detroit Tiger hitting a home run. My life was perfect. Not a care in the world could pierce the armor that was created by sharing this memory with my father.

“Hey you gonna do it today?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I yell, seeing the source of the voice. A large woman, a Captain, stared at me from behind terrified eyes.

“Go, Go, Go!” She shouted pointing to the now open front doors. “Go now get out of here soldier.”

The smell of outside filled my nose. It was the cool clean smell of crisp, freshly fallen leaves with just a hint of the cold of November. I ran. The fluorescent lighting of the building left my eyes ill-prepared for the brilliance of the sun; it blinded my for a moment just as I cleared the second set of doors.

“He is coming back in!” The large captain yelled.

My feet quickened. I had never run this fast in my life. Zig zagging through the open lawn towards the parking I looked down. I could almost see the hand me down socks slowly working their way off my feet as I ran to save Jeremy. I
reached the parking lot and slid on some loose gravel, feeling as if I had lost my footing in my old footy pajamas right before breakfast. Get behind that building, I commanded myself spotting a small shed on the far side of the lot. I sped up, no longer caring about evasive maneuvers. I made a straight line for that barrier. I don’t want to get shot in the back. Adrenaline filled my body as I ran past the white minivan in the parking lot and around the corner of the shed. It’s all or nothing now. I thought as I pressed my back into the side of the shed. I can’t stay here. A few hundred more yards of lawn and open space separated me from the road, and safety. There were dozens of police cars now speeding down the street. I heard more gunshots. He is still out there. I have to go now.

I left my new hiding spot and pushed my body to limits that I didn’t know existed. I ran with the strength of God and the determination to live. If he does shoot at me, I bet I out run the bullet, I thought. Refusing to look back I kept going. The cold autumn air chilled my lungs and cooled the sweat on my forehead. I will either make it to the road, or get shot. Either way. I half smiled, and it was at that moment that I thought about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Old Yeller; I thought about bumblebees and loose socks; I thought about the Tigers, and my old white minivan — random happy thoughts.