

TINNITUS:
STORIES THAT RING TRUE

by
Allana Wooley

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Charlotte Hogg, Ph.D.

Department of English

Alex Lemon, MFA

Department of English

Wendy Williams, Ph.D.

Visiting Assistant Professor, John V. Roach Honors College

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Introduction

The collected stories of “Tinnitus” are not about me. True, I narrate two and at least one of my subjects for each piece is an acquaintance. Ultimately though, these stories are not my own. These stories are about fighters, adventurers, and dreamers. These stories are about times when there is no hope, and times where the vast number of possibilities is euphorically overwhelming. These stories are about curiosity and learning and following one’s passions. These stories are not about me. This does not, however, mean they aren’t personal. As such, I feel justified starting off on a personal note:

I used to write about dogs a lot. Scratch that, I used to write about dogs all the time. In fact, for a space of about six years, I wrote about dogs exclusively. My mother, brother, and I used to have Saturday writing competitions. In between cleaning the house and doing our chores, we would write a response to a prompt one of us proposed at the beginning of the day: Why do kids have trouble waking up during the week, but are alert and active bright and early on Saturday mornings?; How do Animorphs get their powers?; Why are dogs always smiling? No matter what, a dog would end up in my story playing the hero. I actually got in trouble for this loyalty to my favorite subject matter. In second and third grades, when writing our own math word problems was a common assignment, I would find a way to fit in a dog. *If Fido the Basset Hound ate three bones and buried seven, but Skittles the Dalmatian ate two and buried five, then...* My second grade teacher quickly grew tired of reading dog problems, so she banned me from using them. I switched to wolves, coyotes, and dingoes instead.

The point of this back history is that I have always found a way to write about my passions. These have changed over the years, transitioning from dogs to horrific tween

fiction to current events to wacky facts. No matter what I write about, though, it is genuine curiosity that brings me to my subject.

For a while, I thought I wanted to be a journalist. I got involved with my high school paper and my town's twice-a-week newspaper, writing and publishing dozens of stories for each publication. I didn't love my experiences—I was often bored and resented the fact-delivering structure I was expected to write within. Despite my lukewarm attitude toward the work, I kept coming back to journalism. After a string of assignments left me sitting at a desk, essentially just Googling the need-to-know information, I lit upon the reason—I love interviewing.

I love sitting people down and asking them questions about their lives and hobbies and interests. Forever curious, my passion is learning about the passions of others. My love for interviewing and broad curiosity is why this collection of stories now exists. I enjoy writing just about anything, true. But I only really love to write when I write about the people and stories you can't find on Google.

This is what I like about nonfiction writing. One, I get to be as nosy as I want. People, I have found, are exceedingly comfortable talking about themselves as long as you listen well and keep them plied with enough questions that they don't have time to sit back and consider how vulnerable they are being. Two, every story brings me a deeper exposure to the wonderfully weird collection of experiences that make life so interesting.

I'm interested in these details because they are human details. An anthropology student as well as a writing student, I can't help but be fascinated by the myriad ways individuals are shaped by the world around them, reflecting the cultures that have surrounded their lives. The way people think, their personalities, their evaluation of

priorities, their relationships—these are all cultural things, human things. Everything reveals a little something about the person who gives it to you—do they like cheese, what was their neighborhood street like, when was the last time they spoke with their childhood best friend? I like to discover and situate these details within the stories in which they appear. A story about a person or a small group of people isn't just a story about that person or that group of people—it is also about the surrounding culture. How does the story being told contribute to a broader understanding of the world in which we live? Answering that question in a ten or twenty page story is a gargantuan task, and not a skill that I can entirely claim for my wheelhouse just yet.

Tom Wolfe believes the ultimate goal of nonfiction is to “show the reader real life.” In *The New Journalism* he says that the goal of creative nonfiction is to intellectually and emotionally involve the reader, to say “Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days! These are the things they do!” This mission is what I'm trying to accomplish with the following collection of stories. By writing nonfiction, I'm preserving and making available real ways of living.

In the following pages, you will find stories of groups coming together, falling apart, dreams dashed, reality setting in. Stories about life, essentially. While some of the names have been changed, the stories, characters, and personalities laid out on these pages are very real. Though most are now quite removed from the stories in which they star, they still go about their day-to-day lives much like you and I—breathing, eating, loving, fighting, watching mundane television and going to work and school. My characters are real people; I think that is a vital characteristic to note before stepping into their lives.

Phillip Lopate writes, in his edited collection *The Art of the Personal Essay*, “The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions.” Montaigne’s ramblings in the mid-sixteenth century were as much nonfiction as Joan Didion’s meditations on culture in the late sixties were as much nonfiction as Oliver Sacks scientific breakdowns of interesting patients. The truth is the only constraint. The flexibility is the best perk.

I wrote five stories for this thesis. “Soldier, Civilian, In Transition” was written for and published in *Fort Worth, Texas Magazine*. Although I originally conceptualized “Waterford” as a pseudo-investigative business drama, it quickly became clear that my father inability to let go of a once-grand dream was the more poignant story. “Tinnitus” was written as a gift for the subject, to help her find closure after a traumatic experience. “We Take It As A Class” was written for myself, as a way of understanding a once-in-a-lifetime experience. “The Reenactors” was written for a class assignment, although the subject matter, the interviews, and the direction were independent decisions. In these five stories, I highlight domestic violence, global aspirations, the Boy Scouts of America, the personal tragedy of failure, and starting over. The five are written in a bevy of different formats—narrative, personal, collage, contemplative, vamped-up journalism. My point, with this introduction, is that nonfiction has no set form, no set subject, no set origination point, no set rules save for one—tell the truth.

“Tinnitus” tracks a woman as she is accused of attempting first-degree murder. To tell the story, I interviewed her on two occasions for a couple of hours each, checked facts with a secondary player in the story, and combed through the associated police file as well as saved email records. However, despite the hard documentation in my

possession, I ultimately chose to write the story from the women's perspective, working through her memories and presenting those as the full truth. The infallibility of every detail can be questioned, of course, but this story is *her* truth, her reality. I am, full disclosure, very close to the woman in the story and my mother even plays a small role in the events. I've known the story and heard new details unfold over more than a decade of my life. Acknowledging my bias and lack of access to a few of the crucial players—her husband, the police officers—I shifted my perspective. The story is still nonfiction, it is still the truth, but it tells her truth, her memories, and unravels to match her recollections. This story I wrote for her. In over ten years she had never talked through the whole ordeal—not to a therapist, not to her best friend, not to her two sons, and not to her new husband. She sobbed, rehashing painful memories with me, and later told me she couldn't sleep for a week afterwards. But she thanked me—telling the story and having it recorded gave her the final bit of closure to finally allow others in to her experience.

Not all of the included stories are so personal, however. Two of my stories, “Soldier, Civilian, In Transition” and “The Reenactors” were written for very specific avenues. “Soldier, Civilian, In Transition” was penned for and published in the November issue of *Fort Worth, Texas Magazine*. For this story I found and interviewed five returned veterans about their active duty service and their lives post-discharge. We talked about their kids, what they still wanted from life, why coming home is so hard, what they think of the military now—and so much of what these soldiers shared ended up hidden in a Word document on my computer. The story's publisher forced that, of course, allotting only so much room for editorial content and requiring the piece to have a ring of the journalistic and the local to fit the publication venue. I'm okay with that—when

writing about something important (and it's all important, in different ways), sometimes what matters most is that the piece is read and shared. This is also part of the writing life—sometimes you have to choose between your creative instinct and your editor's list of demands.

Subjects prone to public misconceptions and stereotyping, such as the teenaged bunch of Civil War reenactors profiled in “The Reenactors,” need a little bit more care and attention paid to them. The community surrounding the hobby is highly insular, to such an extent that what I write will likely be the only exposure many readers ever have to war reenactors beyond goofy commercials and movies. I need to do my due diligence. Who are these people? What do they do? Why do they do it? I answer the same six questions every journalist strives to cram into the first twenty-five words of the traditional inverted triangle structured stories—Who, What, Why, Where, When, and How. Creative nonfiction simply allows me to approach these queries with more creativity and texture. Emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and relationships are just as crucial to nonfiction stories as dates and locations. These are the details that help readers empathize and understand subjects vastly different from their own lived experiences.

Covering my ESL certification class's strange and immediate kinship in “We Take It As A Class” could only be truthfully done if I also wrote myself into the classroom. Like Joan Didion's essay “Slouching Toward Bethlehem,” this essay doesn't set out to separate myself from my content. I am observing as much as participating, sharing what strikes me, and letting my writing organize and bring me to meaningful conclusions. Essentially, I'm thinking on paper.

Years of anthropological study have left me fascinated by subcultures, strange passions, unique devotions. Though these stories are vastly different in tone, style, content, and format, they can and do boil down to one focus. Who are these people and what is it that they do or have done? I aim to introduce readers to new people and experiences, both good and bad. By doing so, I hope to make one tiny contribution to what I believe is the purpose of creative nonfiction: crafting windows through which anybody can look out at the world.

TINNITUS



TINNITUS

Judy Mitchell, W/F, 6-17-62, needed nasal spray. When her own nightstand failed to produce any, Judy got out of bed and walked to the nightstand opposite her sleeping husband Rusty, W/M, 1-22-58.

The nightstand light was on, shining a spotlight on the gun in the drawer. Judy picked it up to get it out of the way and continued rummaging for nasal spray. Somehow, mid-rummage, she bumped the gun, heard a noise, and felt the machine recoil down to hit the side of the nightstand.

Startled, she tried to drop the magazine out of the gun. Aiming for a better purchase to hit the release button, she grasped the top of the weapon. That's when she heard the explosion.

It took a moment to register the burning sensation on her hand and realize she must have shot herself. Rusty didn't move. The gun fell to the bedroom floor. Rusty's voice cut through her shock, "Call for help." *911*. She saw that Rusty was bleeding too.

Judy doesn't remember much after this. She never found the nasal spray.

These are the things Judy kept to herself, details not found in the official police report:

Judy couldn't sleep. Lying next to her huge, bulking husband, she stared at the clock and watched the minutes tick by, bringing the first day of the last month of 2002 to a close. She listened to her husband's belabored breathing and tried to calm down.

His last words before rolling over to fall asleep lay heavy in the room, breeding fresh anxieties and fear with each passing minute.

It had been a good Thanksgiving. Rusty's whole family had gathered to spend the week at Rusty and Judy's house in Arlington—his dad, Jim; his sister, Lory; his brother, Larry; even his daughter and her new baby. They had all eaten too much while commiserating about their collective weight gain, Judy had argued good-naturedly with her father-in-law Jim about her always-in-bloom flower bushes—which he didn't yet realize were filled with fabric stand-ins—and her young boys had had fun sleeping in and playing video games as late as they wanted.

Still, Judy was relieved when the weekend finally came to an end. Larry had left to fly back home early Sunday evening and Rusty's daughter had returned from a shopping trip with friends to pick up her daughter and go home as well.

Only the leftovers in the fridge and the baby's crib remained as testaments to the week's crowd. Judy was happy, but exhausted, after hosting so many in her home. Rusty, however, hadn't seemed to notice any difference in the house. Clinically depressed for months, he had been detached all weekend. He left his grandkid for Judy to take care of

and entertain, spending his time polishing and fondling his newest gun show acquisition instead.

“Don’t you think we should take the crib down?” Judy asked Sunday night. With everybody gone, she wanted to reclaim the natural patterns and rhythms of her home. As long as the crib still stood in a corner of their bedroom, they were forced them to veer in circles around the faded wood.

“I’m tired. I’ll do it later.” Rusty didn’t even glance at the crib.

“Well, then shouldn’t you at least put your gun up?” Rusty hadn’t been more than a room away from his new toy in days. Judy was tired of turning the corner in her house to find the gun perched on the flowery bedspread, amongst the post on the kitchen counter, or cradled across his lap.

“I’m tired. I’ll do it tomorrow.” A twinge of anger crept into Rusty’s voice. He took a swig of the beer he was nursing and resettled himself into the armchair, cheeks contracting over his clenched teeth.

She glanced at the bedroom closet not ten feet from where Rusty sat. Originally intended as a tornado shelter, he had taken over the space to create a shrine for his extensive gun collection. This is a more useful form of protection, he had promised her. It would have taken him two seconds to put the gun away and her at ease.

Judy dropped the subject, knowing this was not a battle she would win. Frustrated, she turned the TV to WFAA NBC 8 for the 9 o’clock news.

A child is in critical condition in Fort Worth after his father went on a rampage, shooting his family before turning the gun on himself.

“That’s terrible.” Judy said. “Imagine that poor child surviving and losing everything.”

Rusty’s voice was calm. “There will be no survivors when I do it.”

The minute hand moved to the nine. 9:45. Rusty was snoring, knocked out by the beer and multi-drug cocktail he swallowed every day.

Every time Judy tried to close her eyes, however, a mental image of the gun laying in the top drawer of Rusty’s nightstand table appeared. Judy couldn’t shake Rusty’s words, *There will be no survivors when I do it*. As long as the gun was there, she knew she wouldn’t be sleeping. The gun itself was just another reminder of the man Rusty had become. When she’d met him, he had stepped up to fill her ex-husband’s shoes. He’d even adopted her young boys, Jordan and Taylor. They loved him. He was their dad. But now, stinking of alcohol and sweat, his presence was more threatening than loving. Judy felt trapped. She couldn’t leave—she had nowhere to go and she didn’t think she’d be able to get her boys away without Rusty noticing.

He might be her husband, but he was also terrifying. Over six feet tall, 300 pounds, he was monstrous in both size and demeanor. She didn’t want to be married to him anymore. She had known she didn’t want to be married to him for months. But she always came back to her boys—after the first divorce, their dad hadn’t so much as sent a Christmas card. At least Rusty was some kind of father figure. That was important, right?

Sitting up carefully, Judy swung her legs out from beneath the covers and cautiously stood, trying not to disturb her husband. She needn’t have worried. He was out. Judy edged around the foot of the bed and eased the nightstand drawer open.

The handgun lay on a mess of pens, eyeglasses, and other detritus, the black somehow more menacing in the dark room and dark night. She hissed. The safety was turned off. So stupid. Judy grasped the gun and lifted it out of the drawer. Though Judy knew guns, had been forced by Rusty to take handgun classes, the weight still surprised her.

She decided drop the clip out and back into the drawer. If he decided to do anything in the middle of the night, Judy thought, she would at least be able to hear him put the clip back into the gun. If that happened, it would be too late for her to do anything, true. But Judy reasoned that knowing was better than not knowing.

She was just going to drop the clip out and back into the drawer. That's all she was going to do. Yet somehow (and nobody, Judy included, is really sure how) the gun went off. A bullet ripped through the hand Judy had thoughtlessly cupped over the muzzle. The bullet shot into Rusty's back, through his barrel of a chest, and out of his torso into his lower right bicep, ending superficially in his left wrist.

The bang was so sudden that Judy didn't understand what had happened for a few moments. The shooting pain in the fatty tissue beneath her pinky claimed her attention first. She thought she'd pinched her flesh in the slide. Cursing, she looked down and saw blood spreading across Rusty's chest and arms. A pool of almost-black liquid spread out beneath him. Rusty slept with his arms folded over each other as though he were praying to the God he barely believed in. Seeing his still body, unmoved despite the trauma, Judy threw up a prayer of her own.

“Oh, God.”

She dropped the gun into the drawer and snatched the old corded phone from its dock on Rusty's nightstand.

"911. What's your emergency?"

"There's been a shooting."

Officer Farley, along with Officers Constantino, Molina, Doak and Carter were dispatched a little after 9:30 PM on Sunday, December 1, 2002. The orders indicated the caller had accidentally shot her husband in the chest and that she had already unlocked the door for arriving first responders.

When they arrived, the door was not only unlocked but half open, revealing an empty living room and a silent house. Officer Farley announced their arrival, "Hello? The Arlington Police Officers have arrived. The Arlington Police Officers have arrived!" No response.

Officer Farley drew his gun and held it in the gun ready position. "The Arlington Police Officers have arrived. Is anybody in the house?" A female voice came from the back of the house. "We're back here!"

Following the voice, the officers crept to the back of the house, locating the master bedroom. A white female in underwear and a bra was standing in the middle of the room, clutching her hand. Blood

streamed onto the carpet. A naked white male lay sideways on the bed. Blood coated his chest and pooled onto the sheets around him.

“Where is the gun?” Officer Farley’s own gun was still in the ready position. The female pointed to a nightstand, where a small Glock handgun lay on the floor, sans magazine.

Officer Farley reholstered his weapon. “What happened here?”

Judy threw open the front door just as two paramedics in a fire truck pulled up. EMTs couldn’t enter until the police arrived, a two-minute infinity later.

Soon a fire truck and four police cars spilled out of the driveway. Half a dozen men moved in and out of her house with clipboards, cameras, stretchers, and caution tape. Rusty remained unconscious. The officers pulled Judy into the living room to ask her questions while the paramedics worked on Rusty.

“What happened?” “How did this happen?” The police officers were insistent. Judy tried, but couldn’t quite put the right words together to explain it. She both knew and didn’t know what had happened.

*How did the gun go off? If the clip dropped out, where did the bullet come from?
Why didn’t he switch on the safety?*

She couldn’t answer any of her own questions, much less theirs.

Slamming Judy into a plastic chair in a sparse questioning room at the Arlington Police headquarters, Detective Foley, the Domestic Crime Officer assigned to her case, leaned close.

“Why did you murder your husband?”

It had been eight or nine hours since the gun discharged and Judy had been moved twice—once from the house to a hospital and, now, from the hospital to this police questioning room. Detective Foley, who she’d met hours before at the hospital, had turned a complete 180. He had been brusque in the hospital Judy and Rusty had been transported to immediately following the shooting. Now his face contorted, angry creases filling with obvious contempt. Judy looked down at her hands, handcuffed and bandaged and sprinkled with her tears.

“What?”

“You’re just a husband murderer, aren’t you? We need to know why you shot your husband.”

“But Rusty isn’t dead.”

“He’s dead if I say he is.”

The paramedics had loaded Rusty into an ambulance and zoomed off to Methodist Hospital of Dallas, the closest ER equipped to handle Level One traumas.

Judy’s oldest son, Taylor, had already woken up by the time the police arrived. Jordan was woken up soon after by another officer. Not knowing what had just transpired, not understanding what was happening, the boys stood and stared at the strange men in familiar uniforms. Their questions died on the very puffs of air used to

give them voice. When the paramedics ushered Judy, still in her underwear, towards a second ambulance, she said a quick goodbye and made sure the police knew what number to call so Rusty's parents.

Inside the ambulance, her hand was examined by paramedics. Their job done, they pretty much ignored her until they reached Methodist Hospital of Dallas too.

When she arrived, Judy was treated like a regular patient and given bandages and painkillers. The Emergency Room doctors and nurses were helpful. Then an intern walked into the main treatment room, his opinions about the incident directed to, from Judy's point of view, the room at large. "Sure, accident if she shot him once, but with this many entry and exit wounds, she shot him a few times." Instantly, the attitude towards the half-naked hand-bleeder flipped. Nurses stopped smiling at her and refused to answer her questions. Interns looked at her with a mix of horror and excitement, tripping over themselves in their haste to get out of her room. Before the intern's careless opinionating, Judy had been treated like a witness. Now she was the villain.

At some point, Detective Foley walked up and introduced himself to the stout, bawling woman. A thin guy, of average height and blonde hair, his appearance didn't intimidate Judy. She was too focused on the cluster of doctors muttering and glancing her way, a picture his thin frame didn't quite block.

Detective Foley pulled no punches getting into his agenda. He read Judy her Miranda Warning, had her sign a small MW green card stating she understood, and elicited her agreement to discuss the shooting.

Judy's sobs grew a little less controlled. "Am I going to be arrested? Am I going to be arrested? Oh god, am I being charged?"

She told Detective Foley it was an accident. She hadn't meant to shoot Rusty. They'd been watching TV as a family, the boys too. Everybody went to bed and Rusty took some medicine. She had closed her eyes for just a few minutes. But, unable to sleep because of a cold she had been fighting, she got up and began looking for nasal spray. She said she had only picked up the gun to move it out of the way. She wasn't sure why Rusty had the gun there. Most of the guns were in a bedroom closet they kept locked at all times. She told Detective Foley about a loaded gun she kept in a radio lock box on her nightstand, a box that required a digital code to open. She told him the combination to the safe. She gave him permission to go into the house and conduct a search. She answered every question he shot her way.

Eventually, Detective Foley left her to visit the ICU on the third floor for Rusty's statement. *That means he isn't dead, right? Right?*

After that, things happened both fast and slow for Judy—one of those episodes where every thought seems magnified and time stills, even though you know life is going to blur the edges and confuse the details later. Her thoughts were just fragments and observations—*is he okay, oh god, how did we get here, why are they backing away from me?* These thoughts floated to the surface as quickly as they were dragged back below the tide of crushing fear and worry.

Rusty's sister Lory came to visit in the early hours of the morning, delivering the relieving news that Rusty was stable, talking, swearing up and down it wasn't Judy's fault. He was going to be fine. Lory hugged Judy, told her it was okay. The family didn't blame her for anything.

Officer Constantino and Crime Scene Investigator Thorsen were still in the home at 11:50 pm, combing through possible evidence.

A one-story, three bedroom home, the front door opened into the living room. Across the living room was a kitchen and dining area, with an office beyond there and a master bedroom beyond that. The bedroom's desk had a black Glock laying on it, magazine out, slide open. Next to this was an entertainment center filled with television and movies. A portable baby crib sat in the corner. Atop the chest of drawers was an open and empty green fabric gun case, 19 boxes of live .45 Sellier & Bellot ammunition, a vinyl bank bag with several fired casings and a few live rounds of Colt .45 ammunition.

The four stacked pillows topping the King size bed were doused in blood. One pillowcase and pillow had holes torn through them. Blood was also on the top and bottom sheets, a white bedspread, and a beige comforter.

Bottles of prescription medications spilled across the top of the nightstand, into the drawer, and onto the floor. Nestled into the drawer with the prescription pill bottles was a filled gun magazine containing ten rounds of live Win 9mm Luger ammunition.

A single fired Win 9mm Luger casing was on the floor behind the nightstand.

Officer Constantino snapped pictures of everything and CSI Thorsen bagged everything up, taking special care with the still wet bed linens. Officer Constantino received a call that multiple gun shot wounds had been found on the victim. The two reworked the room, intent on a renewed search for the multiple projectiles and casings to match the victim's injuries. Nothing more was found.

“He can't be dead. That doesn't make sense.” *Lory had said—*

Detective Foley had returned to the hospital after speaking with investigators at Judy's home and was quick to slap a pair of cuffs on her.

“You're under arrest for the attempted murder of Rusty Mitchell.”

Within minutes she was sitting in the backseat of a cop car, staring at the grid separating Judy the criminal from Foley the public servant.

She had understood him, knew what those words meant on an intellectual level. Knew that she had been, on some level, expecting this to happen. The second the intern had convicted her and the atmosphere shifted, she had realized how she would be perceived. She had shot her husband; that didn't look good. But Judy also knew it was an accident. That's why the handcuffs and the cop car and the booking room baffled her. Those were aspects of the judicial system only criminals experienced. The extent of

Judy's knowledge was supposed to be confined to what she learned from *Law & Order* reruns.

The beige questioning room echoed with her terror, the concrete walls a surprisingly effective amplifier of dread. Fat tears pushed down her cheeks, again. Arms folded before him, Detective Foley was not impressed by her display of vulnerability.

Tell me what happened.

Why did you shoot your husband?

How long have you been planning on shooting your husband?

Where did you get the gun?

Why was there a loaded gun in the house?

Why did you shoot him three times?

Was once not enough?

Where did you hide the other bullet casings?

How long did you wait before you called the police?

Why did you kill your husband?

She felt the questions like a tsunami, nightmarish waves rushing over her in their absurdity; of course she hadn't meant to shoot Rusty. Of course she could see how bizarre the situation was. Of course she was telling the truth.

But, she also didn't remember specifics. Had she pulled the trigger by accident? Had the clip fallen back into the drawer? Had it been one blast or two? Heavy and swollen, Judy's eyes drooped.

Detective Foley snapped her back to attention. "Do you think this is a game?"

Talking loudly so he could hear himself over her sobs, Foley ran through the speech he had been preaching to her for the past few hours. Judy would never see her kids again, she would be charged with first degree murder, she would spend the rest of her life in prison. Judy must have shot Rusty three times, he had so many holes in his body. But what did she do with the casings of the bullets? Did she hide them before the police arrived? If she tampered with the evidence in this way, how else did she hamper the investigation? Judy could rest assured, the police would find out.

Detective Foley wasn't interested in her answers—no matter how many times she answered his questions, he kept asking the same ones. She remembered watching news coverage of trials in the past where the accused had been bullied into submission or changed their tune after an exhausting night of unrelenting questioning. She knew any deviation could and would be used to nail her. So, despite the flip-flop of facts and nightmares, real and imagined, that exhaustion was bringing on she stuck to her original story.

Unable to sleep, she'd gotten out of bed to look for some nasal spray. She'd had a cold and needed medicine. When she couldn't find it in her own nightstand drawer, she looked in Rusty's. That's when she found the gun. Surprised, she had picked it up and it had somehow gone off. Over and over and over again, Judy recounted this chain of events to Detective Foley. Whether he was in her face, yelling across the table, threatening her with prison, the loss of her boys, the end of life as she knew it, she repeated this story. What else could she do?

Her body rocked with the force of her sobs, dimming at times to hiccups before starting up again with renewed vigor. She wondered what had really happened. The

discharge of the bullet had taken but a second. This fraction of a moment was slipping farther and farther away, even as the fallout continued. The moments before, during, and after the bang needed to be explored, but Judy had not been left in peace long enough to think through them. How could a bullet have come out of the gun if the clip fell out? Rusty had forced her to take a course to get her gun certificate. Now the certificate was being thrown in her face by Detective Foley. *But keep with it, she told herself. Stick to your story. And Lory said Rusty was fine. So I didn't kill him. Not dead, not dead, not dead. Rusty's not dead.*

Judy burst. "But he's not dead!"

Foley rolled his eyes, tired of this line. "He's dead if I say he's dead, so answer my questions."

"I am!" Judy didn't know what this guy wanted. She searched the walls, hoping for some rule, some clue that could help her out. Nothing. "I am telling the truth. I keep telling you I'm telling the truth!"

"Hey!" The bandaged man in the ICU greeted Detective Foley. Despite the off-white wraps around his body and his location, the man was grinning. He ushered the detective to come up beside his bed. Rusty assured Detective Foley that Judy wouldn't have shot him intentionally. Judy knew weapons, that was true, but his new semi-automatic Glock 9mm, model 23 was brand new to her. It had probably been an accident.

Foley pressed Rusty. But Rusty was adamant. Judy probably hadn't done it: their marriage was good; they were somewhat in debt, as most lower middle-class families were; they loved each other; he had adopted her kids. The gun was in the nightstand

because he had cleaned it and placed it there after relatives had been visiting over the weekend. He had a concealed handgun license. Judy had a concealed handgun license. This was all just one big accident, he was pretty sure.

The pretty's and the probably's stood out from his grin as Foley left the hospital.

Jordan, W/M, 11: "My bedroom is blue and is in the front of the house. Around 8:30 P.M. I was done watching television, so I walked to my bedroom. I have ADD and my mother gave me my medicine before I went to sleep. I do not remember much after this. I do remember that my parents were laughing together in the living room, prior to me going to bed. I do remember that my mother had a stuffy runny nose and I believe that they usually go to bed around 10:00 P.M., but think they went to bed earlier that night. The next thing that I remember was waking up and seeing a cop standing over my bed. The cop told me that my parents had been shot and that I saw my grandpa Jim walk into the house. My grandpa Jim took Taylor and me from the home and he took us back to his home. I never heard my mom and dad arguing that night and I never heard a single gun shot either. I just wanted to tell Detective Foley that my mom and dad get along very well and we do have some quarrels, but we all seem to get along well."

Taylor, W/M, 14: "I was laying on my bed but I wasn't asleep yet. I heard a somewhat loud sound like something hitting a wall. I only

heard one such sound. I didn't realize at the time it was a gunshot. I continued to attempt to fall asleep because I didn't know what had happened in my mom and step-dad's room. A few moments later I heard police radios and a police officer came into my room. The officer told me that there had been a shooting accident and that my mom was shot in the hand and my step-dad was shot in the chest. I heard my mom, Judy, crying but I couldn't make out what she was saying. I was allowed to go to the ambulance to see my mom. She told me everything would be fine and told me to take care of my younger brother. I ended up going to stay with my grandfather. My mom has been married to my step-dad, Rusty, for about 4-5 years. They get along great. They have never had a serious argument that I'm aware of. I have never seen any kind of violence between them and they love each other. Mom and dad were getting along great all day. Me and my brother love my step-dad and he treats us like we were his own children. He treats my mom very well. My dad collects guns. There is no way I believe this was anything but an accident. My mom and dad would never hurt each other on purpose."

"Do you need help opening that?"

Pastor Wayne Ogle pointed to the bottle of orange juice clutched in Judy's hand. She looked down. "Oh, yeah." She waved her bandaged hand vaguely. "I can't do it."

Not particularly hungry and not enticed by the cold, flat sandwiches delivered for breakfast and lunch, the orange juice was the only thing Judy had kept from either meal. Carrying the bottle while she paced her 8 foot by 10 foot cell, she hadn't been able to get the top off. Eventually she'd forgotten why she was carrying it. Maybe because grasping something was better than grasping nothing.

Her minimally treated hand started bleeding again. Guards decided she was trying to commit suicide and she was immediately put on suicide watch. The intervals at which guards walked by to look in on her shrunk. The constant eyes on her didn't help her relax.

The row of cells were filled with women who had been booked for one reason or another. With sleep evading her, she spent the time talking to her new neighbors. Some were waiting for their trial date to be set, in for tax fraud and stealing identities. A few were sleeping off booze, to be released once they were awake and sober. A couple of prostitutes offered Judy kind words and hopeful platitudes, not that it helped. She was the only one being accused of murder.

Every few hours, Judy was pulled into the questioning room for another lightning round with Detective Foley. Each time she was asked the same questions.

Why did you shoot your husband?

It was an accident.

Were you having problems in your marriage?

Yes. No.

Where is the life insurance policy on Rusty?

There isn't one. He's unemployed.

When are you going to start telling the truth?

I am. I swear I am.

Are you keeping information from us?

Rusty's an alcoholic and addicted to prescription medications and a gun fanatic and clinically depressed and I'm scared of him. But if she said any of that it would give her a motive. No.

When she first arrived at the police station, Judy underwent check-in procedure, covering her body with the thin, scratchy fabric of inmate scrubs. Changing before the bored, critical policewomen, Judy felt raw, naked in more ways than the one.

Time passed, as time tends to do, filled up with interrogations and neighborly cell chats and pacing the floor and staring out the window. Eventually, Judy found herself sitting before an old family friend with an opened bottle of orange juice. Drinking gratefully, she listened to Pastor Ogle update her. Pulling his Baptist pastor and city councilman cards, Ogle had wrangled a face-to-face meeting outside of visiting hours.

“The boys are fine.” Ogle knew exactly where Judy wanted him to start. “They’re staying with Rusty’s parents.”

The chair creaked as Judy leaned back, a degree more relaxed. “Oh, good.” A moment of hesitation. Then, a flood of questions, everything she had been repressing, avoiding thinking about, spilled out: “What happened to Rusty? I don’t understand why they said I killed him when he’s alive.”

“I don’t know. But Rusty is alive. He’s up and talking and he’s telling anyone who will listen that this is an accident and there were no problems in the marriage.”

Good, as long as they were lying together.

Ogle told her that while they were working to get her released, she didn't have to talk to the police if she didn't want to.

"But I didn't do anything wrong."

From the moment Detective Foley snapped handcuffs around her wrists, this had become her mantra. "I did not do anything wrong. I did not commit a crime. I did not attempt to murder my husband." Judy chanted it to Ogle and repeated it to Foley when he called her in for questioning, again.

"One more time." Foley said Tuesday morning, still harsh but a little less insistent. "I need to know every detail."

Constantly revisiting the details of a few seconds made the specifics of a day and a half in a concrete cell haze together, even as they were happening. Mostly, Judy occupied herself by watching the sky darken and then lighten again. During a lighter sky, Foley came back to the door with a female police officer Judy didn't recognize.

"I appreciate your cooperation." Foley's voice was strained, his eyes narrow. "We're letting you go, charges pending. For everything to be dropped you need to return on Thursday, December 5 for a polygraph examination." He said the final line with a smirk, arms folded across his bony chest as if he was sure the polygraph would prove her guilt.

Judy padded down the hall, flinching at each light slap of bare foot against tile. She was being released from the jail—they'd given her back her freedom in exchange for a promise to submit to a lie detector test in a few days. It was over, probably. What 'over' meant for her life, exactly, she couldn't fathom. She hadn't slept since before the gun

discharged. The energy required to form cogent thoughts seemed daunting. Judy only knew that her legs were moving, pulling her down the hallway.

Rounding the corner into the station lobby, Judy saw her boys. For the first time since the gun fired, she felt happy. In a huddle of tears and arms, Judy began sobbing again. "I love you boys."

Though Judy had no shoes, and was clothed only in the thin pajamas Jim had brought to the station for her, the group made no qualms about exiting into the cold December morning. Judy, her boys, Lory, and Jim went to the house so the boys could eat lunch. Judy wanted to shower for the first time in days. Then the group would drive out to the hospital to visit Rusty.

With water running over her, Judy began to think clearly again. Pieces of the story that had been confusing her began to fit together and she remembered what Rusty had said about the boy who shot his family. "When I do it there won't be any survivors."

Judy took the longest shower of her life, afraid to get out and face the bedroom, afraid to face the ramifications of the incident, afraid to see Rusty. When she did finally get out, she asked Lory for a few minutes alone.

"Are you sure?" Nobody wanted to leave Judy by herself for very long, especially after the worrying amount of time she had spent in the shower. They kept coming to the door, knocking, asking if she was okay. Did she want anything? Finally, seeing that Judy wouldn't be ready to leave for the hospital until she had some time alone, Lory agreed. "If you need me, I'll be just right here. Just right outside the door."

Judy shut the bedroom door firmly behind Lory, sealing her out. Averting her eyes from the wine-hued stains, she dialed one of the only people she knew would be unequivocally on her side. “Lonnie?”

“Hey Judy! What’s up?” Though Lonnie lived nearly seven hours away, she was still Judy’s best friend, a relationship that had lasted over a decade, since their kids were toddlers. Most importantly, she was one of the few people in Judy’s social circle who wasn’t related to Rusty. Practically single moms by practice (though not legally), the two had bonded as their young children grew.

“Umm. I, uh, I need to let you know,” Judy hedged. “And you can answer any way you want to on this, but someone in this house has been arrested for attempted murder and I need to know if you can come up?” A half-second later Judy added, “You don’t have to if you don’t feel safe.”

“Judy—what happened?”

The story Judy shared was essentially the same as what the police had heard. She had been looking for chapstick (in this story), found the gun, pulled it out of the drawer to see if it was unloaded and it went off. Judy said she’d been in jail but was back at her house. She needed Lonnie’s help.

“I’ll be there on Thursday. Can you make it until then?”

Judy agreed. It was a short phone call, but it made her feel better, like she would have support no matter what she decided to do.

Grabbing clothes at random, Judy began shoving them into a backpack. She didn’t know exactly what her plan was, only that it did not include staying (in her house, with Rusty, next to reminders of the shooting and her recent ordeal). She had until Thursday to

figure it out. Lonnie would help. Judy had to stick around for a while to take the polygraph anyway.

An insistent rap startled Judy. It was Lory. “Judy? We need to go now—to go see Rusty. Rusty’s waiting for you!”

Judy was terrified of having to walk into Rusty’s hospital room. She didn’t know what to expect. What would he think of her? How would he treat her? How bad would the injuries be?

But when Judy, her boys, Lory, and Jim walked into his room, Rusty began to cry. Slow, quiet tears dripped off his red face. Seeing his family and knowing everyone was okay had reduced Rusty into just the sort of man he hated. Judy began to cry. Hers were the sobs that had soundtracked the last few days of her life. Both began to apologize.

I’m so sorry I put the gun in the drawer.

I’m so sorry I shot you.

I’m so sorry, please forgive me.

No, I’m so sorry. You have to forgive me.

Crying and sobbing and commiserating with a man she didn’t love, Judy felt relief, at least, that he wasn’t dead. She wasn’t a murderer. The family stayed for a few hours, checking out Rusty’s new scars, patches of puckered and still raw-red skin.

The next few days blurred together, a numb acclimation to post-shooting life. Lonnie arrived later in the week to help take care of the boys. Rusty’s condition improved. Judy passed her polygraph test. Normal things happened too—Jordan’s cello

recital, grocery shopping, buying new sheets for the bed in the bedroom. Normal activities in a surreal existence.

An alone, face-to-face conversation with Rusty didn't happen until the afternoon after Judy passed her polygraph test. Cleared of all charges, Jim, Laurie congratulated her, saying she would finally be able to put the whole nasty incident behind her. Forget about it. Judy knew better. The hospital was about to release the quickly-mending Rusty and Judy knew that, if she was going to leave, her window of opportunity was quickly narrowing.

Propped on a few pillows and smiling from one side of his face, Rusty didn't give Judy the chance to bring up her own agenda.

"You know," he paused, smile widening. "If you were to leave me now, it would make you look like you were guilty."

Judy was taken aback. *How did he know what I was thinking?*

She was married to a crazy person. A sociopath. Even though she was in a safe environment, surrounded by neutral white walls, doctors and nurses, and any medical equipment she could ever need, an gowned, injured, and still-confined to a hospital bed Rusty was still managing to intimidate her. Her shot had been accidental. Rusty had already claimed a proficiency in delivering efficient executions. *There will be no survivors when I do it.* She was stuck.

"Well, I wasn't planning on leaving..."

Judy did leave, eventually.

When Rusty came home, things were good for a while. In a show of solidarity and togetherness—*our marriage is good*—the two behaved like a happy couple and, at times, the marriage felt like a happy marriage. The shooting never became just a part of their past though. It was always present, another player in the marriage. When Rusty and Judy argued, Rusty would occasionally bring it up. “Well, you shot me, you know,” he would deliver the line as a trump card no matter the situation or the years in between. He would tell Judy she was lucky he had lied for her. He’d saved her from a life of prison and polyester, and she owed him.

For a while, Judy put up with it. Rusty was confident he could make her do anything—she’d shot him, so who would ever believe her if she claimed he was abusive? Then Taylor, now a teenager, broke his foot and was prescribed hydrocodone to manage the pain. Rusty told Taylor to man up and deal with the pain. Taylor didn’t really need the hydrocodone. Instead, Rusty began taking it himself. He quickly became addicted.

This wasn’t particularly surprising to Judy. She had already known he was an alcoholic and a drug abuser. But now he was messing with her kids, kids old enough to know better and young enough to brave standing up to his behavior. It was this bravery that led Jordan, her youngest, to the receiving end of Rusty’s fist. A pissed off, inebriated Rusty pushed Jordan down in their living room, climbed on top of him, and pummeled him to teach him respect.

Judy got the courage to leave. She sent Jordan away immediately, to live with his previously absentee father in Mississippi, and began work on getting herself and Taylor out of the home. She borrowed money from Lonnie, found a place to stay in Mississippi,

packed their things, and got the hell out of dodge while Rusty was at work. She didn't tell anybody in Rusty's family.

Months after she left, Rusty sent her a flurry of emails:

06-09-08 16:13

I hate you if I ever see you again you better kill me.

06-09-08 17:44

Does everybody know you fuck the gov. out of thousand of dollars every years from a made up dissablity. Does any one know you shot your husband in his sleep to try to collect insurance money I will tell everyone I can. Does any one know your sons ane pussys and will be jail soon I will make3 sure you and your friend will never make a dime and you know I can

06-09-08 18:52 (to her employer)

I know how and I have the people to fuck you you better dump Judy she is wanted for murder.....

06-09-08 18:54

I will do any thing I can to hurt you and your pussy sons

06-09-08 18:54

IRS is on there way

06-09-08 18:55

Can still fake you it I don't think so

06-09-08 18:55 (to her new employer)

She shot me

More than ten years later, remarried and living in Mississippi, Judy decided to tell her new husband Tom about the shooting. She pulled out the police report she had requested from the department six months after the incident occurred.

“I don’t understand the police report, though,” Judy said, pushing the file into his hands.

“What don’t you understand?” Tom flipped open the folder, calm. He already knew about the man Rusty had been when Judy left him. This would be just another reason why he was grateful she was in his life now.

“I don’t know how I shot him with 10 bullets still left in the clip.” The question had haunted Judy for years, costing her many hours of sleep.

Tom paused, looked up from the file he was thumbing through. “Because he was an idiot. That’s why. He had 11 bullets in the gun, one was loaded in the chamber, ready to go.”

SOLDIER, CIVILIAN, IN TRANSITION



Photograph by Alex Lepe

SOLDIER, CIVILIAN, IN TRANSITION

Half a percent of the American populace has served active military duty since 9/11. The past 13 years have seen Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (OEF, OIF, and OND, respectively) and the involvement of some 2 million American soldiers in what has shaped up to be the longest war in our nation's history.

As with soldiers in past conflicts, those who served during this time, whether in overseas combat or in support positions stateside, have left the military profoundly changed by their experience. Coming home is at once a relief and a terrifying prospect: veterans face a return to a civilian world at odds with the strictly regulated military life they know. Discharged soldiers must come to terms with whether their own political beliefs align with their service, the military-induced personality changes that will reverberate throughout their lives, and the often misplaced stereotypes—murderer or hero, and rarely in between—projected onto them by civilians.

Soldiers, civilians, in transition. It's tough to be in between, to see what lies on both sides of what freedom means.

At 19, Mike Prado didn't know what he wanted from life. Whereas the high school stars—the quarterbacks and valedictorians—had gone to college, he was still looking for the purpose they seemed to have found. So, when an Army Of One commercial came on TV one afternoon while he was lounging, as was his wont during his directionless year, Prado paid attention. Ready for the kind of personal responsibility and purpose-driven

direction the commercial promised, Prado enlisted within the month, “ready to rock and roll.”

Then reality hit. Prado graduated from basic training and then advanced individual training, an intensive four-month military education as a medic. Within a year of signing up, he was assigned to a cavalry combat unit and beginning his first tour in Iraq. During this nine-month period, Prado helped establish a visible US presence in the country. He was rewarded with a year’s reprieve at home and a second tour of duty in the “triangle of death” just south of Baghdad, carrying out humanitarian missions like providing schools, water, and safety to villages in the area. But Prado was also a soldier, so the peaceful missions came alongside dealing with guerrilla warfare and IEDs. When Prado had seen enough, he decided he wanted out.

He didn’t regret enlisting—he had served his country, found purpose and discipline, and internalized core values he still lives by today. Honesty, integrity, a code of honor, camaraderie with his fellow soldiers—these were the good things.

But with a war that didn’t look like it was ending anytime soon, Prado knew he didn’t want to spend every other year in a foreign country facing watching his nightmares unfold. And what he didn’t count on, what no soldier counts on, is the battle he would face during the transition from military to civilian life.

Like many of his fellow soldiers, Prado returned home to find that his wife had left him. Because crowds made him nervous and anxious, he didn’t like to spend time in the city or go out in public. PTSD hindered his plans of pursuing a career in sports medicine, which reminded him too much of his time in the service. At 20, he had been responsible for the health of between 30 and 40 soldiers, offering services from basic

health care to a shoulder to cry on. Prado treated gunshot wounds, broken bones, and blast injuries—sometimes so horrific Prado and his crew had to pick up “meat” from the side of the road and put it in bags so the family would have something of their soldier to bury.

Prado had spent six years of his life doing a hard job few could understand or handle, often in a foreign country far from home and family. When he came back to Texas, he spent four months living in a rented trailer on ranch land, taking a break from the world and trying to figure out how he would live in the familiar world he was now a stranger to.

With integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect, and excellence (together, the five core values are I CARE), the Veterans Administration aims to live out their mission statement: “To fulfill President Lincoln’s promise ‘To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s Veterans.’”

Upgraded to a cabinet-level department within the United States government in 1988, the VA has seen its budget increase nearly 300 percent over the last quarter century. Encompassing the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and National Cemetery Administration, the VA offers medical “points of care” in the forms of medical centers, Vet Centers, community-based outpatient clinics among other programs dedicated to education, vocational training, housing and homeless assistance.

That's a lot of money, a lot of power, a lot of resources. But, on the other hand, there are a lot of veterans that need these programs. For all the programs in place to help veterans, many are treading water, trying to keep afloat under the ever-growing tide of veterans. Of Gulf War-era II veterans (any individual who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces after September 2001), nine percent are unemployed, 29 percent report a service-connected disability, and veterans make up between one-fourth and one-fifth of the homeless population.

A snapshot of the north Texas area, where 23,282 veterans arrived between July 2012 and July 2014, would reveal why the VA complex in Dallas, at 84 acres, is the second largest in the country. The OEF/OIF/OND Program at the VA North Texas coordinates medical and psychiatric care for returning combat veterans and provides case management services. Services include case managers connecting veterans to department and community services, job fairs, rehabilitation programs, counseling, homeless programs and more.

“There is an adjustment period, so one of the things we try to do is to ease that adjustment period,” Betty Edwards, Program Manager, said. “The military is a different way of life than civilian life. A lot of times when they serve in the military and then come home, things are not the way they left them and so they have to adjust to those changes. Multiple deployments factor into the challenges for maintaining stability for families. We try to help people put the pieces back together the best way to help them function and move forward.”

These adjustment services were introduced as a way to atone for the sins of a post-Vietnam era U.S. “Previous war veterans were complaining about a disconnect and

that they weren't getting the care they needed, so all VA medical centers have a program like [the OEF/OIF/OND Program for returning combat veterans] and work with the military in providing VA care to make sure there is no lapse in care and the same quality of care is ongoing," Edwards said.

Of course, not all veterans want to come home from their term of service and immediately begin navigating the complex bureaucracy that is the VA. For those service members, Vet Centers were created, offering, according to their website, counseling, rehabilitation, employment services, and more to any veteran who "served in a warzone or area of hostility and their families, family members who experienced an active duty death and veterans of any era who have experienced any form of military sexual trauma or harassment."

Joel Chaverri, a veteran of OIF and a licensed critical social worker and readjustment counselor working at the Tarrant County Vet Center, has worked for the system for eight years. "There have been a lot of changes [within those eight years]," Chaverri says. "One of the big changes is adding more marriage and family therapists; we recognized a lot of vets coming back have not just their own issues. If you want to take care of a vet you have to take care of their support system too."

VA center employees are proud of the systematically growing awareness of veteran needs. They've worked in the system long enough that they have actually seen shortcomings fixed. No system is perfect or 100 percent successful, but the VA is trying. Veterans need more reemployment services? Done. Veterans need more counseling services? Done. Veterans need better housing assistance? Done.

But this responsiveness, while great and necessary, also causes problems when it is implemented as a blanket, one-size-fits-all solution. In large rooms filled with other anxious-to-return-home soldiers, exit and reintegration strategies are fired at the weary audience, with little in the way of checking whether or not they stuck. Chaverri, who has been on both sides of the soldier-civilian divide, remembers his own last days in the military, “I just wanted to leave. When I got out of Iraq, I sat in a room with a PowerPoint, with a presentation that explained all my VA benefits but all that was on my mind was getting back with my family.”

Eight years later, Chaverri is one of the many making presentations to the weary and ready-for-home men and women. “Every member of the military who gets off active duty or back from deployment goes through some transition briefing or class to help them transition to civilian life.” Chaverri and other Vet Center counselors join representatives from a bevy of veteran services organizations to give presentations on what they do, how to get access to the program, and how to enroll. These VA representatives do their best to engage the presentees and answer questions, but when making presentations to anywhere from a dozen to 300 transitioning soldiers, information is often lost in transmission. “There are so many benefits out there, just so many programs and organizations, that you only get five to ten minutes to let them know, ‘Hey, this is what we do at the Vet Center’ and the hospital only has five to ten minutes and so on.”

The military spends a lot of time and resources training soldiers to do their jobs: six to nine weeks of basic training, between three weeks and two years of advanced training, and continual training sessions and field practice over the course of their service. The transition back to civilian life involves less preparation. The soldiers I spoke to

described a five-day period packed with information sessions covering everything from resume building to the services they are entitled to as veterans.

“You go through this out-processing and these classes and they give you these pamphlets and brochures and three things are going through our mind: ‘I’m tired,’ ‘I want to go home,’ and ‘Can we just finish this?’” Cristina Mungilla, 33, National Guard veteran, said. “I think that’s part of the problem with vets is, yes, there’s stuff out there, but where do you start? They all sound like the same thing. You get lost, you really do.” Mungilla is passionate about this topic, shaking her head in disbelief, recalling the impossible maze of brochures and program names she has been given over the years.

“At the time [I got out], the army was still unprepared for the needs of the new veterans versus your Vietnam vets,” Prado, now 31, said. “They were rolling out new programs but those weren’t beneficial yet, there was so much bureaucracy and red tape that they weren’t worth doing. Were options there? Yes. Were they easily obtained? No, not even close.”

Chaverri and his colleagues recognize this, which is why they place so much emphasis on outreach. Anywhere veterans might be found—job fairs, benefit fairs, college campuses, motorcycle festivals—VA representatives go. The goal is to educate veterans about the full extent of services available to them. There are the VA hospitals, 300 Vet Centers all across the country and its territories, and even 70 mobile vet centers bringing counseling services to the front door of veterans and family members.

Even the most well-meaning VA Centers and counselors must problem-solve when dealing with veterans who don’t want to admit to having problems. Or handling veterans who haven’t slowed down enough to realize they need help. Or showing

veterans it is okay to seek help; they won't be taking time and care away from their comrades. During the transition services out-processing, soldiers are given a questionnaire that asks if they have "had nightmares, experienced trauma, or saw [sic] anyone killed," Chaverri said. "They'll say no just to get out of there faster. That is something about the military mindset is that they don't want to appear weak, as if saying they need help is weak—which it's not. I know a lot of people say to me they don't want to take a benefit because they feel like they are taking it from someone else. In that sense, you see these guys are so dedicated to each other—I'm not a hero, that guy's a hero—in a sense it's humility, but it's also that they are a hero. Those people are heroes, they did serve their country. They do deserve benefits and they aren't taking benefits or appointments from someone else. I find it so frustrating, I just want to shake them and say, 'You deserve this too!'"

The military lifestyle is a beast in and of itself. Surviving day to day requires an entirely different set of skills than those necessary or even valuable to making it in civilian life. Many who join are young and idealistic, wanting to serve their country and travel, or they are joining to change their prospects, whether they have a child or are thousands of dollars in debt. Very quickly, they grow up. New soldiers are taught to use weapons, trained to have mental fortitude, and instructed in the finer points of purposeful profiling. Then these recruits are placed into serious jobs, where they are expected to follow orders without question or complaint. Survival means constant vigilance and allegiance to the company. Compare that to their counterparts, young people attending and graduating from college or entering the workforce for the first time. Surviving in the

civilian world often means paying for rent, car insurance, and a phone without having to borrow money from one's parents.

Elyana Ramirez joined the Navy because they offered to pay back \$40,000 in student loans. At 21, Ramirez felt fortunate to find a way to get out of debt, be financially stable and to pursue her passion as a storyteller working as a lithographer recording the tales of enlisted sailors.

But, due to military restructuring, she was forced to pick a new job during basic training. She was constantly at sea, away from family and loved ones. When her service was up, she had no job leads or school prospects lined up—deployed up to two weeks before her separation date, Ramirez had completed her transition out-processing months before and not only did the information not stick, but she hadn't had the time to make post-military plans. Drinking and swearing were givens within the Navy culture and had changed the way she behaved and spoke. Ramirez avoided dating or starting a family while she was enlisted, leery of the rampant rates of divorce and adultery. And Ramirez had grown colder—"I was a lot tougher. I say that because I didn't want to be looked at by my coworkers as another girl that couldn't hold her own weight. And that was another way that I was able to put myself in a position not to be assaulted, especially sexually because that's a huge problem in the military. I had more of an edge to me, definitely."

"Sometimes it's frustrating because [civilians] have these assumptions that you've maybe killed someone or have PTSD, but they don't know what that is. They don't understand because they haven't been exposed to the life. They only know what they've heard. That's why I sometimes feel it is my responsibility to open up to civilians and

share stories and answer questions and help them realize some of the things they've heard are not always true.”

This sentiment is a common among veterans and VA representatives alike. There's a disconnect between what civilians conceptualize about soldiers and what reality is. This is why veterans like Prado take four months to get away from the world—they need the time to recover and decompress from their experiences away from the assumptions they come up against every day.

“There is a certain mentality that comes from having served that the general public just can't relate to,” Mungilla said. “You're coming back to civilian life which is a culture shock even though you were a part of it.” She recalls speaking to a retention NCO who commented that many separating service members would be coming back. Civilian life is chaotic, there is a lot of freedom veterans aren't quite used to, and the support often found amongst your battalion is gone.

And while stereotyping the experience of individual soldiers is a serious problem—veterans can face workplace prejudice from employers afraid they will ‘snap,’ have to field questions about whether they ‘killed someone,’ and sometimes have to deal with political extremists who assume they agree one hundred percent with every mission they carried out—some of the national news stories about the military do reverberate, even in North Texas.

Stories of grossly under-investigated sexual assaults resonate with Ramirez's time aboard the U.S. *Berry*, where three or four instances of sexual assault occurred. If a higher ranked officer committed the assault, they would be transferred to a new ship and

given a fresh start, while the victim would be stuck on the old ship with everyone aware of what happened.

Mungilla's account of the Fort Worth Outpatient Clinic—VA North Texas Health Care System is uncomfortably reminiscent of the recent scandal surrounding VA hospital efficacy. “You can't just call and get an appointment. You have to call and say you're sick and then the nurse calls within 72 hours and decides if you need a visit over the phone, and that is if you get them to call you back.” The infrastructure is in place—veterans get doctor's visits, checkups, and pills for free and female veterans' primary doctors double as their OB/GYNs. The issue is with the number of veterans utilizing the services—the Fort Worth Clinic services all of North Texas. The VA has set up systems, like the online personal health record My HealthVet, to address certain complaints, but the fact remains that seeing a different doctor for every visit can be disconcerting and lead to oversight.

Mental health, while treated very seriously and conscientiously by those with the VA, still carries a stigma that prevents many from seeking services. “The biggest lack [in services] was the mental health aspect and that's still going on today,” Prado said. “Nobody's prepared for somebody who has seen these horrific things and then been released back into the civilian world. That's one reason why the suicide rate is so high, I think everybody would be lying if they said they didn't have issues when they got back.” Admitting to problems like PTSD, depression, anxiety and more is hard for many veterans, who are programmed to appear strong no matter what. Talking about and seeking help for problems is even harder, which is why the services the VA offers in counseling and rehabilitation are so crucial. A 2013 Department of Veterans Affairs

study reported the staggering statistic that 22 veterans committed suicide every day and active duty suicides have jumped 30 percent since 2008. But, though designed for all veterans, these services still fail to reach every individual affected by PTSD induced by time in the military.

Mungilla served eight years in the National Guard, and, though she was never sent overseas, she was stop-lossed and activated for OIF. She was forced to drop everything—a part-time job, part-time school, and full-time motherhood were put aside as she prepared for Iraq at Fort Hood. Within a month Mungilla’s fiancé had cheated on her and her toddler wouldn’t speak to her, unable to understand why her mom had left. She quickly fell into a severe depression. Though not fit for active duty overseas, Mungilla served with a group of 30 guardsmen in a rear detachment supporting the forward unit. As a member of headquarters’ personnel, Mungilla supported pay issues, family issues, and casualty operations. It was a lot of responsibility and a lot of emotionally-taxing work. But, because Mungilla never served in a combat zone, she was and is not eligible for many veterans’ services.

“I didn’t go overseas, but it really rocked my world with issues like PTSD.” It took nine years, twins, the death of her grandmother, and near homelessness before Mungilla reached a point where she felt she could stand up and take charge of her own life again.

Issues for one-time military personnel aren’t just limited to considerations of available services and programs. Many personnel are trying to come to terms with the very fundamentals of their service.

Growing up, Austin Denny, now 26, had a front row seat to two versions of what military service can do. Both his father and his stepfather both served during the Vietnam War. But whereas his dad developed severe PTSD, became an alcoholic, and left when Denny was still a toddler, his stepdad was a present, attentive man who found a way to cope with being shot at. When Denny found out he would be the father to twin boys at 19, he joined the Air Force, hoping the military would provide a window into his fathers' worlds.

Denny did well. His high aptitude for language led him to work in a classified position in a joint service environment. Though there were periods of on-base deployment—when war or international conflict broke out, Denny and his colleagues would lead exhausting 15-day marathon shifts punctuated only by four hour naps on a cot—he was never sent overseas.

Denny got out in **2012** so he could spend more time with his boys, who by then lived in North Texas with their mom. But in the years before and after separating, his college courses and personal research led him to question the institution he had given four years of his life too.

“It is so much more complicated than it used to be. Now veterans can't say with as much certainty that what they were doing was 100 percent the right thing. After joining and doing more research I found I disagreed pretty strongly with a lot of what we were doing, but it's tough in the military because you can't express those opinions. It's actually illegal to say you disagree with an operation.”

Bottom line? Every veteran, no matter what stage of transition they are in, has a unique experience. Some love their time in the service, and feel more mature in their

expanded life experiences. Some question their participation in a powerful institution too big to comprehend. Some suffer from PTSD. Some are just fine, shifting into civilian life as if they never shifted out.

No soldier shares his or her exact experience or reaction with any other soldier. But they do share the fact of experience. As Chaverri recalled: “I was at an outreach event one time and there was a picture on a display board from a veteran in Iraq. A Vietnam vet walked up to me and looked at the pic and said, ‘You know, it’s a different year, but it’s the same faces.’”

WE TAKE IT AS A CLASS



WE TAKE IT AS A CLASS

We pick our seats carefully, a handful of adult Goldilocks testing out chairs for the perfect fit. The desks are arranged in a long horseshoe with roughly 25 chairs crammed into place. There is enough room to scoot back and stand up but, when the seats are full, leaving will require the awkward choreography of climbing out of a row of airplane seats. In the middle of the horseshoe is a solitary desk and chair set, one too many for the narrow room. We know, socialized into seating arrangements and the simple comfort of redundancy, that the seat we choose will be our seat forever (the next three weekends).

At 8:40 on a July Saturday morning, I'm the third person in the room. A dark-haired, petite girl sits along the side closest to the door. The blonde I followed in chose a seat on the opposite leg of the horseshoe. We smile politely. I can crawl over my already seated classmates or park myself across the back of the ring without disturbing anybody. I'm only the third person in the room, so I park myself at the back of the class, slightly off-center in case the instructor likes to stare down the middle during lectures.

We don't speak.

I stare around the room, gathering my bearings and summoning enthusiasm for the long slog ahead of me. The interior decorating leaves a lot to be desired—we are in an all-cream room with no pictures, no posters, one white board across the front of the horseshoe, a clock above my head on the opposite wall, and a wall of grimy windows through which only a tree and grass can be seen.

Students trickle in as the minutes pass by. They copy me, or maybe I copied the first girl, and stand in the doorway for a minute, assessing. Where to sit? Who is here?

How will they survive sitting in one place for the next nine hours? The seat matters. At this point, we're all strangers to each other—random weirdos who voluntarily gave up their summer weekends for this course. Who wants to sit next to a rando like that?

The reason we have all voluntarily sacrificed our summer weekends is to earn our Oxford Seminars TESOL/TEFL Certification. “Your next job could be your greatest adventure!” the advertisements for the course promised, coaxing us into handing over 1195 dollars for three weeks of instruction (plus “ESL Teaching Resources, full access to the English Language Schools Directory, and unparalleled Graduate Placement Service!!”). For nearly a month, 9 am to 5 pm every Saturday and Sunday, students will review grammar concepts, think up ESL warm-up games, and learn everything from classroom management techniques to second language acquisition and teaching English grammar.

This certification is my ticket (all of our tickets) to “a journey of a lifetime.”

That's why I'm here, after all. I'm about to graduate and I'm terrified of turning into a cubicle drone. I don't know what I want to do with my life and this seems like a good enough option. Travel, teach, adventure, live. I can sacrifice three summer weekends in a bland classroom for mountains and oceans and new friends, languages, and customs. I want a journey of a lifetime.

Looking around the room at the slowly filling seats, I wonder why my neighbors are here. These strangers look somewhat well-adjusted. Are they not happy with their lives? Are they just looking for a job? Or did they see the advertisement pop up on the

right side of their Facebook scroll and think, “Fuck it, why not?” That was enough to convince me, anyway.

Our instructor stands at the front of the class looking at the tower of books before him. Nearly all of the seats are filled, but he waits to speak. Glancing at the clock, he decides to wait a few more minutes, ducking the top of his gelled head and shuffling through some papers. His forehead is shiny, his lips pursed, hair split severely to reveal a white strip of scalp. He counts the books one more time.

“Okay, let’s go ahead and get started.” It seems the instructor has run out of ways to stall. He talks with his hands, rolling them around each other and throwing them out to each corner of the room. “My name is Chris, this is Oxford Seminars Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language course—is everybody in the right place?” Chris also talks with his head, and it nods along with the class.

Chris calls roll, pausing after each name to stare at the “present.” It’s obvious he is trying to memorize our faces in conjunction with our names. “Have you submitted your payment yet?” Every class member receives the same question, a reminder that we paid a grand to be here, among strangers on a fine summer day. If we haven’t paid, Chris tells us, we have to either write a check immediately or leave. That’s because he hands out books next, and books mean money and books mean you are serious and books mean you are really ready to do this and earn this 100-hour certificate and go live and teach English abroad for a year. Once the books are handed out, we’re in.

Jenny is the first person in the class to break the awkward silence, speaking while we are pulling plastic off our new books and silently thumb through them. She is wearing a cute bicycle print dress and a cardigan, and her voice surprises me—loud and authoritative and a little nasally. “So, did you teach abroad?”

We all lean forward—just how qualified is Chris? And the constant worry: Is this a waste of money?

“Yes.” Chris is emphatic, head nodding a full circle. “I spent six years in Vietnam teaching English before I came back to get my master’s in ESL and teach at a college. So, yes, I’ve been where you guys are now.” He’s done this enough to suss out the reasons behind the pointed question.

Chris’s story horrifies and inspires me all at once, like so much else in this post-adolescent/pre-adult phase of my life. Chris graduated college with a degree in economics, netting himself a decent job selling textbooks. Within two years he realized he hated the mind-numbing sameness of his day-to-day and left for Vietnam.

“Why Vietnam?” we ask. Chris shrugs. “Oh, I don’t know. The pay is good and it isn’t hard to get a teaching job.” “Oh, okay.” Sounds reasonable enough to us, who, by taking this course, are mostly already enamored with the idea of just leaving, just because.

Arriving in Vietnam, Chris didn’t know the language, didn’t know the transportation system, didn’t have a place to live, and didn’t have a job. His parents, who hadn’t been happy about his move, had helped him cobble together a few thousand dollars as a starting base and off he flew. Day two in Vietnam, Chris put on a suit and

walked into one of the English teaching institutes he had Googled before leaving the States.

“Do you have any jobs for me where I can teach English?”

He stayed for six years.

We start with Emily. We're here because we want to be somewhere else, so Chris grants us this moment of indulgence. This is teacher lesson number one: begin with the dream in hand so students have a clear view of the finish line from the get-go.

Perhaps the youngest in the class, other than me, Emily already has a job lined up for her—in August, she's headed to South Korea with a popular teacher placement program known as EPIK. Her prominent cheeks redden as she talks to us, not so much from embarrassment as from a sort of flustered pleasure. With her elementary teacher style and ability to smile even while she speaks, I like her immediately.

But how did you do it? We all want to know. How did you start?

Emily shrugs. “I don't know. I just applied through EPIK online and they interviewed me over the phone and had me write a sample lesson plan and then told me I had to get my certificate. I think I'm leaving in September.”

Emily becomes all of our spirit animals. She has a job lined up, she's going to a desirable country, and she seems like she will be a great teacher. She's spent time volunteaching in China, so she has real overseas experience nobody but Chris comes close to.

We keep going around the room. A few people want South America, for the “warm climate and warm people.” Lisa is going to Russia to be with her fiancé. Neha is

going to India to raise her son where she grew up. Aaron is going to China to indulge his obsession with the country. Jenny is headed to Vietnam, to experience more of the country where her grandparents still live than the beaches she's visited in past ventures across the Pacific.

A full third of the class is hoping for South Korea. They have the best and largest ESL market in the world, offer great benefits, are friendly to newcomers, and, besides, Emily started the round-the-room game and she already has a job. For my neighbor Marci, that is enough to convince her South Korea is the place to be.

Then it's my turn. Up until now, I hadn't really thought about where I wanted to go but my brother is stationed in South Korea, I've had Korean friends, I'm signed up to start Tae Kwon Do classes in a month. I shrug. "South Korea. I want to go to South Korea." Across the Pacific, South Korea is about as far from my home in Texas as I can get.

We give our various reasons for our various countries and the only thing we all have in common is that we all want to leave.

"You're so brave. I can't tell you how much I wish I had had the courage to go when I was younger. You are at the age to do it!" I've just told my desk neighbor Marci that I am 20 years old, still have a year of college left. Marci is in her mid-30s. She's worked as a nurse, a volleyball coach, a saleswoman. She didn't really love anything. "Now I'm in my 30s and I'm not married and my company just folded and I'm only now doing what I always knew I wanted to do."

I squirm. This doesn't feel like bravery. It feels like a postponing of real life and actually growing up and settling down. I am afraid of becoming Marci, of becoming any of the restless adults filling seats on either side of me.

"Thanks," I answer, "I just know that if I don't go now I probably never will. Or it will be a lot harder."

Marci nods. Had her last business venture grown successful, she wouldn't be here looking for an escape either.

The great thing about a teacher who overestimates the amount of time needed to complete group work is the amount of free time left when the assigned task is completed.

Charles, Kelsey, James, and I range from 20 to 35, spaced such that none of us would have ever attended high school together. Still, our current assignment—analyzing a restaurant/dining skills handout, deciding what we do and don't like, and divving up presentation responsibilities—feels very high school.

"So where do you want to go again?" Kelsey normally sits on the far end of one of the horseshoe legs and we haven't yet had a chance to interact one-on-one. Numbered off—one-two-three-four around the horseshoe—to create the groups, we are

"I'm not sure yet," she replies. "I kind of want to hop around from country to country, you know—spend a year or two in a few places so I can learn the languages."

"Woah—that's awesome!" (In my enthusiastic young eyes, everything is awesome.) "What is the end goal then?"

"I want to be a doctor and do medical mission trips. If I can speak languages well, I can serve my patients better." Mind you, Kelsey is totally relaxed about this

extraordinarily impressive aim. With the tone of her delivery, she might be telling a new recipe she wants to try.

“Wow!” My reactions are far less chill than her cool delivery. “What’s your timeline?”

“Well, I’m Miss DFW right now, so I can’t start looking for jobs until my term is up in January. But hopefully after that.”

Just to add the pile of accomplishments. Kelsey is gorgeous. She is slender and carries a curtain of long, thick dark hair that makes her culturally ambiguous. I think how this will help her transition into almost any country she goes. Kelsey recently won the talent portion at Miss Texas for her ballerina performance. She was also voted Miss Congeniality. She tries to tell me I should compete in pageants. When I shake my head no, assure her that isn’t my scene, she says that she never thought she was that type of girl either. It’s a kind enough speculation, but I’m taking this class to become a cultural representative outside of the U.S. Tying myself to an American city by becoming Ms. anything is exactly what I don’t want to do. I steer her into safer waters and we talk about my internship and a story I’m doing about young veterans returning stateside. She is a passionate volunteer with 22 Kill, a veteran’s nonprofit dedicated to the mental health of returning combat soldiers. She offers to hook me up with whomever I need for an interview. As a bonus, I can totally interview her if I ever need a profile subject.

Kelsey’s biggest inspiration (distinct from her motivations) for leaving is her older sister, who graduated college and moved to Italy to be an au pair. Her sister had the time of her life and, after years of intense work as a pre-med student and city representative, Kelsey wants the same thing.

We turn to James and Charles, who are discussing where they want to go and why they want to leave.

James is serious about this English teaching thing. His appearance is proof enough of this. On day one of class, James sported an unruly, uncombed beard that covered his cheeks and stretched down his neck, nearly to the collar of his Avengers t-shirt. This morning, however, for weekend two, James walked in with slicked back, combed hair and smooth cheeks the following weekend, the whole class does a double-take. “I thought this would be more professional,” he shrugs.

James wants to leave because America makes him sad. He doesn’t say this, of course, but he does say that all of his friends are getting married and having babies and he has nobody and doesn’t like his job that he can’t advance in and he is ready to go ASAP.

Charles, perhaps more than anyone else, enrolled in the course out of boredom. After a little coaxing, Charles abandons his reticence and shares his childhood as a military brat. He moved every few years his entire life, lived in several countries by the time he was 18, and has friends all over the world. He can’t do this permanent residency thing for even one more year.

These are the only conversations we have. All of the focus is on what we are doing now and what we want to do in the future. Nobody really talks about their past.

Tiffany’s feet are huge. Every day when she gets to her seat, she has to unclasp her sandals to make room for her swollen toes. She leans back and sighs, hands resting on her pregnant belly, eight-months round.

“What are you going to do?” Jenny asks. We’ve all been wondering.

“I’m going to take him with me!” Tiffany will wait a year or two, keeping her position as a florist to save money before she begins looking for a teaching position abroad. The baby wasn’t planned, but she has a bad case of the wanderlust and isn’t about to let her future be derailed. “People always ask me how he is going to be growing up overseas. He’s going to be awesome. That’s what.”

We cheer. Of course he’s going to be awesome. That’s why we’re all going abroad, anyhow. We are all trying our best to be awesome.

We actually have two beauty queens in the class. Rashida was Miss Black Texas a vague amount of years back. Rashida is hard to age or place. According to the stories she tells, she has been a beauty queen, a teacher, a co-owner of a strip dance/workout studio and is now working on her PhD. In each of these, she is enormously successful, apparently. Arriving after all the seats around the horseshoe have been claimed on day one, she seats herself in the center desk, inside the horseshoe, and refuses offers to move elsewhere. She’s comfortable in the center.

Her position is directly in front of me, so she frequently turns around and joins Marci and me for group work. Rashida likes to read out loud, her hot pink two-inch nails underlining the words as she goes. With a vague number of masters and certifications in a variety of vague educational arenas, Rashida is supremely confident. When she speaks, no matter what she says, there is an undercurrent of ‘This is the way of the world. Trust me. Believe me.’

Rashida is going to Saudi Arabia in to join her husband. He’s accepted a position as the director of a franchised university with outposts in the U.S. and around the world.

Rashida and her young daughter are joining him in a few months, just as soon as Rashida gets the TESOL certification finished and negotiates her way to the highest possible salary.

She presents, as we all must, on the country of her interest. “The Middle East has, hands down, the highest salaries for ESL teachers anywhere on Earth,” Rashida says. She smiles, thinking about the money. “They pay for your housing, a driver if you are female, your health insurance, your plane tickets there and back home, a considerable amount of vacation time, and you still get to pocket somewhere around \$3500 a month.” Rashida ticks off the benefits on her fingers. It’s nothing to sneeze at, which is why, when Rashida passes around a sheet for us to sign if we are interested, I scribble my signature and email.

Granted, Rashida admits, she will have to give up certain freedoms. Except for American compounds within Saudi Arabia, she will have to carefully abide by the laws set in place by the national government. For Rashida, this means no driving, teaching classrooms of women only, and making sure she is escorted by her husband everywhere she goes. “But Saudi Arabia is a very family-friendly country. They really value family and as a family there are a lot of things to do.”

I certainly hope so, for her sake. She is an outspoken, independent woman. Going to Saudi Arabia is going to mean giving up a lot. “I’m a fashionista,” Rashida declares, after describing the abayahs women must wear in public, covering their legs, arms, and wrists. Because she is a foreigner, she will be granted permission to forego covering her head. “Normally they have to be all black, but they do have style, there is fashion in them.” I can’t tell if she is convincing us or herself.

Rashida walks around the room holding out her phone's screen, on which she has called up a number of images of Abiyahs. A few have pink trim, one incorporates lace (backed by solid black fabric), but mostly they all look heavy.

When I receive an email from her husband the following day about a potential job, I delete it.

I have made a fatal flaw and sat too close to the A/C unit. Blake and James, the two biggest guys in the class and Lisa, who is moving to Russia, are the only classmates closer to the freezing air.

I start bringing my winter coat to class and worrying about the weather in South Korea.

Pulling up my phone's weather app, I add Seoul to my cities. It's 82 degrees and looks like it will be in the 80s all week. Good. I decide I won't check the temperature there during the winter months. I don't want to give myself any reason not to go.

Ukraine is under attack and we want to know how Lisa feels about it. The instigators are Russia and Putin, and she seems to be running right into their arms. When she sits down for class on weekend two, we ask the fighting and the reports of bombs on TV are making her nervous.

"I mean, I never saw any reason to be alarmed." Lisa puts her hand across her heart, swearing to us and herself and probably her mother too that she is telling the honest-to-God truth.

In her experience, Russians are friendly and flirty. “Every single day when I would get on the bus for school or walk to the market or go out or whatever, I would just have men coming up to me and saying how beautiful I was and asking me out. When I came back to America, I was like ‘What is wrong with me?!’ because nobody was saying anything about how I looked anymore!” We laugh. In less than a minute, Lisa has changed Russia from a breaking news story to a sitcom. We feel comforted; we aren’t soldiers going to battle, we’re just teachers. Surely we’ll be fine.

Lisa is like most of us. Rashida is taking herself and her seven year old daughter to Saudi Arabia, where she won’t be able to drive, choose how to dress, or go out without her husband in tow. Charles and Aaron are looking at China, which, despite its dominance in the world economy, is still a communist state. Vinny and Joanna, newlyweds, want to live in a South or Central American country—of course, there will be gangs and drugs, they admit, but if they stay out of the bad parts of town at night and avoid making enemies, they should be fine.

Our friends and families have told us the dangers, made sure we are well aware of how few rights one has living in a foreign country. Remember Amanda Knox? Remember all those journalists beheaded by ISIS? Remember the American prisoner of war held in China for twenty years before his release? We remember, but we choose to ignore. We laugh at our family’s warnings, sharing them with each other in over-the-top voices. The wilder our exaggerated mimicry, the easier it is to deny their worries.

A modicum of denial is essential for us to succeed. That’s what separates us from those who will sit silently at dinner parties in ten years, trying to come up with a story from their cubicle or maybe the watercooler to tell.

For Lisa, what's going on in Ukraine and Russian politics doesn't matter. She has a job lined up in a small town on the banks of the Volga River, a few hours downstream from Moscow. She has a fiancé waiting for her. She has her bachelor's in Russian literature and language to help her out. Lisa is going to Russia. Period.

By lunch on day two, weekend one, Kim has become our class mother. She might be the oldest person in the room, though she is still glamorously beautiful, the wrinkles and aged skin kept in check by fitness and, probably, her penchant for celery sticks. She hands them out during breaks, already playing the role of teacher passing out snacks.

'Come to me, my darlings,' she doesn't verbalize, but still kind of finds a way to say. When Kim speaks to me one-on-one, she does so intently. She gazes into your eyes, lowers her voice, and tilts her head forward. It's slightly unnerving and makes me feel uncomfortable. But it makes me feel special, which is Kim's specialty. From where I sit, it seems like I'm the only one made uncomfortable.

She adopts the vegetarians of the class, taking them out to lunch every day. Eight-month pregnant Tiffany, enthusiastic Emily, Neha, Marci, and Ale fall under her wings and she pours into them. I must admit that I'm a tad jealous.

They come back from lunch holding the same cups and laughing at the same jokes. Day two in class and a classmate makes a brief presentation on how to teach the holidays.

"Well, Ale's favorite holiday is Halloween." The comment comes so far out of left field we all just stare at Kim for a moment. She feeds us a little more information.

"She dresses up all the time."

Our heads swivel to Ale, sitting along the back of the horseshoe and half a room away from Kim. “Uhh . . . yeah.” Ale’s face matches her words and confused tone. Kim leans forward, directing her intentional stare straight toward Ale. A few awkward beats go by.

“I’m a drag king, guys!” Ale’s voice husks at the end and she looks around to gauge our reaction. There are a lot of confused looks, so she clarifies. “It’s like a drag queen, but instead of a dude dressing like a chick, I’m a chick dressing like a dude.” Ah. The class starts to pelt Ale with questions, but we are smiling and Ale relaxes.

Kim leans back in her chair, eyes sparkling in light of her role in the reveal. “And Ale also has a show coming up, the Tuesday after class is over. We should go.” The class responds with exclamation points, though Kim speaks in periods.

It’s not that we hate our lives now. While there are a few exceptions, it seems like most of us are happy. True, James has heavily alluded to a loneliness, Charles to a profound boredom, and Neha to a homesickness that incited their participation in this course. But the majority of us have friends. We have families. We have interests and hobbies and jobs and a life waiting for us each day when we leave the classroom.

Leaving—for me, for the others—is about being proactive. We’re all scared of having to face our grayed, wrinkled reflections in the mirror one day, a reflection looking back and asking us “What if?”

We know what’s here. We want to learn what’s out there.

I can't decide if I like Kim or not. She seems too genuine to actually be genuine, my natural tendency toward skepticism flaring up as she shares unsolicited stories about her life. Still, I can't help but join the rest of the class as we lean into her words, enthralled.

For the past 10 years, Kim has worked as an ESL teacher and detention supervisor at a local high school. This ESL certification course is merely a formality, the paperwork and job placement assistance she needs to get herself a position overseas. She speaks about her students like they are her children, hands pressed over her heart to emphasize her pathos. "My kids have the biggest hearts, though they've been through so much and have overcome so many obstacles." Kim is a better teacher than Chris. When we do group presentations, the whole class leans into her portion of the lesson. It is a quiet command of the class Chris hasn't yet established. When he gives feedback following the presentations, he skips over Kim, nodding to show his approval of her work.

We would be horribly intimidated if Kim wasn't so earnest about her sweetness. Her voice sounds like brushes against a canvas, soft and methodical. You get the feeling, from her voice alone, that she would be a great story teller. "You know," she says often, before launching into something deep and well-considered that we, in fact, did not know.

"You know, when I am in Haiti—and I go nearly every summer to paint—I see the most heartbreaking conditions. But the people are truly, truly beautiful." Kim looks around the room to make sure she has our rapt attention. "They work so hard at everything they do and are always so welcoming and loving. I just go on long walks and talk to the beautiful people and find inspiration to paint." I don't know how Kim knew this would come up, or if she just carries her goods everywhere, but she pulls out a stack

of postcard sized prints. Her paintings are bold and colorful, with clean lines and hypnotizing patterns. Many feature Grand Bois and other elements of Haitian mythology. A primary theme is balance. She smiles as we coo over the passed cardboard squares.

She brings a book on weekend three and passes it around, the chapter featuring an interview with her about her artwork marked off with a bookmark. In the chapter, Kim talks about globalization, capturing a mood, and letting narrative flow through her brush to the canvas. I don't understand what half of her quotes mean. The writer profiling her seems to like the nonsense, though, and so I defer to his expertise. Of course Kim's paintings are good; everything Kim does is good. Kim is good.

As a matter of fact, Kim is the only classmate who doesn't want to move abroad for a year or more. She wants to keep her job and house in the states and reserve her summers for traveling to underdeveloped nations to teach English. "I just feel like I need to do my part."

Her friends lead exotic lives all over the world as artists and journalists and travelers and Kim teaches at a high school in the Dallas suburbs. She needs something adventurous and exciting and comparable to these accomplished friends.

Ale's voice is ASMR crack. Hitting all the right auditory notes to produce a back-of-the-head tingling sensation for anybody sensitive to autonomous sensory meridian response, she has the best voice I've ever heard. Marci agrees. We tell Ale and the class vocalizes their assent. Her voice is soft and clear and lightly accented with just a slight rasp. Lovely. You can't fake a speaking voice this great. Ale's voice makes her a great candidate for founding a cult because when you hear it, you are entranced.

In vintage, 70s-inspired duds and a greaser hairdo, Ale has an all-around cool vibe that only she can rock. Of all of us, Ale is the most excited about the teaching possibilities this little certificate will grant her, maybe because she knows exactly what she wants and maybe because she is also the only one of us who will be looking for jobs without a college degree. Luckily for her, South American countries don't require bachelor's diplomas to find work teaching English.

A few years ago, Ale visited Chile. She arrived knowing nobody but left without ever once having to pay for a meal or a place to sleep, so hospitable were the friends she instantly made. She's been trying to find a way to move back ever since, tutoring Chileans in English over Skype in the meantime. With the combination of the skills offered and her voice, she's making a solid side-income.

Ale's challenge is turning this side-income into a livable income. South America has a booming market for English teachers with experience and specialty knowledge in business operations. Without business experience, jobs are still easy to come by, but they pay next to nothing. Ale has thought it all out, or at least she believes she has. She will live in a hostel and teach English there for free room and board. Then she will tutor on the side for extra income. "It will all work out. I'll be fine." Her confidence convinces us. Ale will be fine, she'll survive. We'll survive in our foreign environments too. Somehow, someway, we are going to make this work.

Chris releases us to take a 15 minute break. The level of chatter raises to cover the scrapes of metal chair legs against linoleum. I stack up my books now that we've finished our miniature group work of creating and presenting a lesson plan.

Kim catches my arm before I head back to my regular seat. “Hey—I just wanted to let you know that I can tell you will be a great teacher.”

I’m still not sure if I like her, but I cherish the compliment. This feels like the last step to melding with the group. Her comment validates my dream.

Emily is presenting her idea for a warm up activity before a lesson on possessive pronouns. The idea is that you dig through your wallet or backpack and talk about an item you typically carry around with you. “This is mine.” “That is yours.” Possessives.

To demonstrate, Emily pulls out a popsicle stick topped with a small cut and pasted K-Pop phenomenon’s head. Her cheeks flush and she giggles a little bit. “This is totally weird, but my friends and I are obsessed with K-Pop, so we made these little figures.” Emily brandishes the stick. “We carry him with us everywhere we go and send each other selfies with our K-Pop crushes.”

“Let’s take a picture then! Send it to your friends from the classroom.” I’m crawling over the desk even as I suggest the group selfie. Instructor Chris shrugs his shoulders and the rest of the class clambers up as well.

The eventual photo cuts Emily’s head in half. The rest of the class is in disorganized rows behind her, crouching and grinning and staring straight at the camera. We curve in from the edges, leaning in toward each other’s company. Ale throws up a peace sign. Only the K-pop star on a stick looks away from the camera.

The camera catches the moment when a group of strangers become friends.

“All right, break for lunch and then we’ll come back and talk about the many ways of getting a job overseas.” For the first time in our three weekend history, we don’t leap up and scatter out the classroom door when Chris releases us for lunch.

“Where are we going to eat?” Marci poses the question as though it is a given that, today, on the last day of class, we will spend our lunch as a unit. Early onset nostalgia, maybe, but all but three of us call the friends and family members we were scheduled to meet, breaking lunch plans.

Seventeen classmates push tables against booths until our row extends across the ironically American Corner Bakery, forcing other diners to walk in long detours around our ends. We don’t care, trading bad pick-up lines, horrifying travel stories, and phone numbers. We add each other on Facebook. “It’s official, we’re friends now.”

The manager takes a picture of us before we leave, bowing his back to fit everyone into the frame. We’re smiling, thrilled at each other’s company. It pops onto my Facebook feed the following morning.

It’s day five, the first half of the last weekend of class, and almost everybody has left, scheduled to do their teaching practicums tomorrow or already done with their feedback. Charles, Emily, Jenny, and I sit on the desks and wait for Chris to finish his conference with Aaron.

The teaching practicums are the big working point of the course, the final of sorts. Every day we are reminded about how important the practicum is and what we should be doing in preparation. This releases a swarm of nerves into the group.

I ask for them. “Has anybody ever failed?” Chris shakes his head ‘No.’ “Not while I’ve been teaching.” In a later discussion, Chris talks about his experience in Vietnam. “I worked in a private language institute, not in a school, so I mainly taught adults who were paying to take the class. You don’t want to test them and fail them because the classes are optional. If they’re paying, they’re also paying for a pass.”

It’s a ‘Hmmm’ moment, especially when Aaron comes out of the conference room, where we will all receive feedback, good and bad, about our lessons. Basically, the conferences are Chris telling us whether we will be successful teachers or not. Walking out of the room, Aaron isn’t happy, but he’s also not terribly dejected. We can tell he passed, at least. He shouldn’t have passed. A number of my classmates shouldn’t have passed, much as I love them.

Aaron can’t string together a coherent statement when he is standing in front of a classroom. His Manga-inspired bangs swing over his face as he consults his notes. “Umm, so what you are going to do, I think, Umm yeah, you need to, just let me check.” Aaron isn’t dumb. He just can’t teach. Aaron knows he can’t teach, but he is probably going to find a job and go overseas anyway. For most of us, teaching is simply a means to an idealized end.

Charles, Emily, and I, the only students left for the day, talk about this while Jenny receives her feedback in the adjacent room. “What are the consequences when anybody can do this?” We don’t know.

It's weekend three, day two, 4:30 pm, and Chris closes his book. "I think we're done. Thanks for being a great class and don't forget about the online component—without that you won't have enough certification hours to get a teaching job."

He passes out manila envelopes holding our fancy, printed and signed 60-hour certificates. Even though we can't get a job with just 60-hours of instruction, the embossed paper feels like an accomplishment. We've taken the first step and now everything is up to us—finishing the online modules, applying for jobs, leaving.

We delay the leaving for a while, pestering Chris.

"Were we your favorite class that you've ever taught?"

Chris stops stacking his books and looks at us, serious. "Actually, yes. I've never had a class as big as you and I've never had a class get as close as you all got. It's been really fun being your teacher."

When we do leave the building, we feel the weight of this bizarre little three-week experience. I wave goodbye, shouting about our plans for Ale's drag show in a few nights. The air is warm and there is a light breeze and we are all in a good mood. The incredible variety of people getting into their cars and pulling away from the little bland classroom that dominated the last month of our lives have become better friends, somehow, than many of the people we are actually friends with in real life.

"Can I touch it?" I want to feel Ale's chest hair. Ale has just finished her performance in the drag show and made her way through her friends and fans to the classroom crew. While several people left after she was done, Blake, Kim, and I stayed to congratulate her on a job well done. Up close I can't get over how good she looks.

Done up as a man, Ale actually looks kind of hot—like a younger version of the grizzled man from the ‘Most Interesting’ Dos Equis ads. Her suit is perfectly tailored to her body, her hair trimmed and coifed like Danny Zuko, the clippings from the trim glued onto her jawline and chest for added panache.

“I can’t believe you guys actually came!” Ale keeps repeating her astonishment. We hug her and congratulate her again. She tells us she performs every Tuesday night, so we should come out again.

“Of course!” we say, though, for my part at least, I know that won’t be the case. By the very nature of the class, we are endeavoring to spread across the globe. The friendships feel real, but can’t and won’t retain their hold beyond the classroom.

Ale will go to Chile and Kim will go to Haiti and Blake will go to the Middle East and I will go to South Korea. The smiling group posing for the LGBT publication *The Dallas Voice* will never see each other again, at least not all together or with as much hope as we have right now.

For a little while, though, before everybody disperses, or stays, or graduates and takes a boring, well-paid corporate job, we can take comfort in a shared yearning our friends and family don’t understand. There are other wistful people out there, Googling flights and jobs and costs of living. Biding their time in the meantime and fondly remembering a TESOL class singing along to ‘DO YOU TAKE IT IN THE ASS?’ at the top of our lungs at a lesbian bar drag show.

I finished my certificate in late September—a full two months after the class ended. With 16 modules covering grammar and teaching strategies in a global classroom,

it was a simple and boring exercise in self-study made harder without the companionship that carried me through the long summer weekends.

During the two months it took me to finish the online component, Rashida finished the entire module, accepted a position in Saudi Arabia, and set plans in motion to leave in October.

Emily has arrived in South Korea, is living in a tiny studio apartment, and teaching a few classes at both a middle school and elementary school each week. She's made a lot of friends and posts pictures all the time.

Lisa posted a picture of a Russian birthday celebration; she is sitting in the woods, surrounded by a circle of dancers. She's married now. She looks happy.

Marci completed her module, cover letter, and resume and sent everything to Oxford seminars. Within 24 hours she had four people from China and two people from Korea contact her, interested. She is leaving for South Korea in January.

A few are still working on finishing the module. Tiffany had her baby. A few more, away from the encouragement of the class, decided they wanted to wait a year, decide if they really want to take the risk of leaving the known for the unknown.

I'm waiting until I get my diploma in May. Hopefully then I will meet up with Emily and Marci in South Korea, where I will teach and hike and learn and panic about the culture shock and reality of being a foreigner I was too determined to think through all the way.

THE REENACTORS:

Learning To Lead in the Face of (Pretend) Death And (Staged) War



THE REENACTORS:

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Ryan Itoh picked himself off the trampled grass of the battlefield. Sweat ran down his face, plastering his jet black hair to his forehead. His too-big regulation wool coat clung to his back. He was exhausted from the long fight, his ears ringing from the close blast of a cannon, eyes smarting from the soot-heavy smoke still enveloping the resurrecting soldiers. Itoh looked down and saw that excess black powder from packing his rifle had sprinkled down his uniform and smeared across his hands. His thin frame shook, shocked after the explosions, pyrotechnics, and frantic commotion of the previous forty minutes.

“I remember looking at my hands and how black they were and I remember thinking, ‘Man, if I would’ve died, this is how I would’ve died—dirty,’” Itoh recalls.

The average teenager does not spend time thinking about their own mortality. They especially don’t give much effort to considering the details of how, precisely, that end will come. Though Ryan Itoh, now 20, was and is a normal teenager in many respects—he plays video games, likes racquetball, and can put away food like it’s water—he is also intimately aware of his eventual demise. This awareness is owed, in large part, to his membership in Venture Crew 1872. Affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America, Venture Crew 1872 has been creating opportunities for teenagers to confront death in Civil War reenactments on an almost-monthly basis since 1999.

This particularly dirty brush with death was Itoh’s first. At 13, Itoh was just old enough to be allowed to hold a gun during his first ever Civil War reenactment—the Battle of Bellmead. Over the course of one weekend, Itoh had left the 21st century for the

mid-19th. He learned to hold a carbine rifle vertically so that the packed imitation black powder, which burned at over 3000 degrees, didn't singe off eyebrows or on-field egos. Muscling the carbine, nearly half as big as his slight frame, Itoh practiced with older, more experienced members of Venture Crew 1872, executing real military drills as ordered by his commanding officers. Finally, after a morning of preparation, Itoh and the rest of Venture Crew 1872 were sent out to put on an entertaining show for the spectators watching from the outskirts of the battlefield.

The smooth, regimented volleys of gunfire choreographed by the event's hosts had quickly deteriorated into wild, frantic blasts aimed in the general direction of the opposing side. After a half hour of fighting, the Union officers realized their troops were running low on both ammunition and energy. Racing down the line, they called out new orders.

"U.S.! Fall in!" The fighting men slung their carbines over their shoulders and drew out their revolvers.

"Forward!" The command echoed down the line of soldiers. "Forward!"

"March!" Again, the order rippled along the line. "March!"

Standing shoulder to shoulder, the line advanced, unloading their firearms. The guns slammed back into the thin shoulders of the soldiers, keeping a violent rhythm as each blast forced its way out of the barrel. They drew within two hundred feet of the rebel army's cannons—800 pound replicas of powerful Civil War weaponry—and halted. The troops continued to fire until they heard the unmistakable thump of a cannon shot. Itoh readied himself for an imagined impact, feeling shoulders on either side of him tense in anticipation.

On a silent count, the line flew backward. The battle ended with a tangle of sprawled limbs and a resounding, though spectacular, defeat. Watching from one side of the designated field of battle, the audience gasped, then cheered, this version of the historic battle one they hadn't seen before. Ryan Itoh, laying on the ground with his Venture Crew 1872 friends alongside men old enough to be his grandfather, smiled. The reenacted battle had been long, exhausting, loud, and thrilling.

Although Venture Crew 1872's turn as Yankees (they always play Union soldiers) wasn't enough to change history and wrest the win of the Battle of Bellmead from the gray-coated rebels, Itoh and his teenaged peers stole the show.

Venture Crew is a program under the Boy Scouts of America umbrella, with membership open to boys and girls aged 14 to 21. 13 year olds (like Itoh in his first battle) can participate in events as a preview of years to come. Unlike regular scouting units, the Boy Scouts of America boasts, Venture Crews offer young people the opportunity to engage in challenging adventures in the arenas of "high adventure, sports, arts, hobbies, religious life, and Sea Scouting."

Venture Crew 1872 is unique among Venture Crews for its focus on local history and war reenactments, despite getting into the Civil War specialization almost by default. Roughly an hour's drive northwest of Fort Worth lies Sid Richardson Scout Ranch, a Boy Scouts of America summer camp on the banks of Lake Bridgeport. With 16 miles of shoreline, Boy Scouts from across the state visit every summer to swim and fish in the open water, hike through the woods, ride horses, and more.

Brian Glass, a petite, bearded man in his forties with a sweet voice and a mental Rolodex of local history knowledge, is ultimately responsible for thousands of teenaged deaths over the past decade and a half. For reference, Itoh, in five years of active participation, died nearly 40 times. A lifelong Scout, Glass earned his Eagle Scout in high school, worked as a camp counselor during college summers, and, now, as an adult, is employed by the Boy Scouts as an architect and project manager.

When the opportunity presented itself, Glass jumped at the chance to bring his two passions—Boy Scouts and history—together, creating a local Indian War impression of life in 1872 for Sid Richardson campers to explore. “Personally, I’ve always loved history, and I really like local history,” Glass says, before diving into a history lesson. “[In North Texas], after the Civil War, there were troops fighting against Comanche and Kiowa Indians. You can go an hour Northwest of Fort Worth and walk out on some ranches and look at battlegrounds where the fighting took place. So that peaked my interest in the local history. Those guys were wearing Civil War uniforms and that is what they were wear at the summer camp program to teach local history.”

A popular summer camp activity is for the boys exploring the impression to pretend the battles that took place more than a century ago or happening still. The highest point on the camp is a hill dug out and fortified with a rock perimeter, where the post-Civil War frontier battles between soldiers and the Comanche and Kiowa would have been staged. The view from the hill is quite a bit different than when the outpost was in active use, trees covering the plain once marked by perennial grasses now that there are no buffalo left to eat the saplings before they grow. Even though it takes a little more

imagination, the young campers have fun pretending they are living the life of a 19th century soldier, keeping watch for intruding hordes and readying the outpost's defenses.

In fact, the Indian War impression held the visiting campers' fascination so well Glass decided to charter a Venture Crew of his own to reenact battles from the Indian War. Unfortunately, Venture Crew ran into a slight hitch trying to get the program off the ground. "In the reenacting community there isn't much interest in Indian reenactments besides just impressions," Itoh explains. "Nobody wants to reenact the slaughtering of Indians."

Although more than 620,000 Americans lost their lives as a direct result of the Civil War, it remains an acceptable alternative to Indian War reenactments. As such, Venture Crew 1872 shifted their focus to the more popular Civil War era, hoping to find a larger network of reenactments. After all, Civil War battles still provided the teenagers an opportunity to experience monumental moments in the nation's history.

The Civil War experience is unique for reenactors so young. Most often, the men lining up on Venture Crew 1872's left and right as well as the men staring them down as enemies from across a battlefield have sun-leathered faces, deep wrinkles, and bushy gray eyebrows. Middle-aged or older, participants often fall into the camps of veteran, decades out of shape, or Union or Confederate soldier descendant. "[The entry into reenacting], for a lot of adults, a lot of them are history buffs and they know the history of their ancestors," Glass says. "They get the uniform of the unit that their great grandfather was in and then they go and find a reenactment and then they join a unit and change their uniform to match that unit. I think a lot of reenactors are just history buffs or genealogy buffs."

Venture Crew 1872 gained quick fame once they started making the reenacting rounds. For one thing, the pimpled, barely-mustachioed faces of Venture Crew 1872's members are far closer to the age and appearance of actual soldiers than their older counterparts. Furthermore, the boys and (a few) girls have boundless energy. They can outrun, outshoot, and outlast any regiment they encounter. Older reenactors typically die when they get tired, lasting just long enough to draw below a shadow. This is common practice frequently exploited by the opposing side: maneuver the opposing side into the shade, and they will die, seduced by the relief from the sun. More often than not, when the smoke clears after a battle, rounded bellies will poke up like little tombstones in straight lines poking out of battlefield trees. The boys and girls of Venture Crew 1872, on the other hand, offer no such easy target, fighting as long as the battle script allows them to.

Because of their popularity and dynamism on-field, Venture Crew 1872 received an invitation to fight at the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. As with every organization-led endeavor, reenacting gets political fast. Posing as the 4th United States dismounted cavalry, Venture Crew 1872 avoided censure by strictly adhering to the dress code enforced by "Stitch Nazis"—men who insist on applying authenticity to everything but the actions of the battle itself. Sometimes, these strictures turn Civil War reenacting into an exclusive club. "Equipment Requirements," listed on a 2009 Venture Crew document, include a basic enlisted uniform, a black slouch hat or kepi, a dark blue four button sack coat, a muslin shirt, sky blue trousers (mounted or foot pattern), braces (suspenders), brogans (shoes) or boots, a canteen, and a belt with an oval US buckle, among other items. The price for all of these things is exorbitant for a hobby. Itoh, who

bought his uniform seven years ago, paid more than 300 dollars. The pieces can only be purchased from specialty vendors and prices increase every year. Guns, an essential part of reenacting, add anywhere from several hundred to a few thousand dollars to the final price tag. While Venture Crew 1872 members get some assistance from the Boy Scouts (they don't have to purchase their own guns), the average hobbyist doesn't have assistance. Cost is just one of the factors contributing to the slow demise of the reenacting hobby.

Enjoying its heyday in the late 20th century, reenactments used to regularly net thousands of participants and spectators—*Time* magazine estimated that in 1986 there were as many as 50,000 Civil War reenactors across the country. Today, this number is closer to 25,000. Only in nationally famous battles around big anniversaries—such as Gettysburg, which boasted around 15,000 participants—do reenactments garner enough attention for significant amounts of reenactors and spectators to show up at any given event. “Today most events might top out at 200 to 300 reenactors on the field, so 150 on each side. That’s considered a pretty good size reenactment,” Itoh says. “I’ve been to some reenactments that are just like 40 people.” This is why Venture Crew 1872 garnered attention so quickly—they were and are young, new entrants to a dying pastime.

Participation numbers aren't helped along by the intellectual war that surrounds the physical battles. The recreated battles are notorious for the liberties taken in their malleable depictions of history.

These liberties are so common, they even have a term: breaking the scenario. “A lot of it is getting caught up in the moment and you get excited. You’re doing your thing, you’ve got a big line, and you’re shooting and if they are attacking and you’re holding, if

they don't push hard enough then you say, 'Well, why would I leave?'" Glass explains. Going into a battle, reenactors know they are in a constructed situation, but once the adrenaline hits and the first guns start blasting, it can be hard to separate reality from a constructed moment. Reenactors nearly always toss the battle script, instead looking for openings and opportunities for their unit to advance.

"When you get out on the field," Itoh says, "typically, the battle plans kind of fall apart and you just know theoretically the North is supposed to win today and the South is going to win tomorrow, so we need to either push or we need to give ground. If [the other side] is really stubborn you get into hand-to-hand combat, which is extremely rare because it is extremely dangerous."

At the end of the day, the historical experience is what most reenactors are after, logical discrepancies and all. Though most soldiers would die after the first three volleys of a real battle, reenactments typically don't have many deaths until the reenactors get tired of running around, run out of ammunition, or find a spectacular way to die that will earn them a loud audience reaction. Itoh confirms, "No one wants to die after being out there for like 20 seconds; everybody wants to have some fun."

This seeming trivialization of historically determined battle outcomes only adds to the perception of participants merely playing dress-up during the reenactments. Scholars and critics of the practice note the inconsistency between reenactors' understandings of the human cost of war and their otherwise painstakingly researched depth of knowledge on equipment and uniforms. The reenactment experience, fun as it is for participants, can be interpreted as devaluing the lived experiences of those who gave (and give) their lives in real conflict. All reenactors, Venture Crew 1872 included, have had to assess how

much Civil War reenactments actually benefit participants, spectators, and the way history is remembered, if at all.

Peter Carmichael, history professor at Gettysburg College, characterized these “fun” war reenactments as an “unfortunate distraction” from the realities and horrors of the Civil War to the *Wall Street Journal*. He isn’t alone in this critique—for many scholars, these reenactments are nothing more than a glorified game of dress up and make believe. In fact, the issue has grown so contentious that in 2006 the U.S. National Park Service prohibited the use of actual battleground sites. “Even the best-researched and most well-intentioned representation of combat cannot replicate the tragic complexity of real warfare,” they said in a statement.

“There is always the romantic notion of the lost cause,” Glass muses, when asked about the true controversy. “Plus, people want to relive the past. During the Civil War people would say they felt like they were living an entire year in a single day. They want to have some excitement in their life again—but it is playing war.”

This is the struggle for those considering the ramifications of reenacting: How does one reflect history without downplaying the real significance? Reenactors with a tendency to break the scenario, such as those caught up in the adrenaline of Vicksburg, threaten the integrity and memory of what actually occurred.

Itoh charged out of the Mississippi creek, his boots sticking in the bog and mud that waited for his unit on the opposite bank, and made it to the line of trees bordering one edge of the farm-turned-battleground. The officer of the dismounted cavalry shouted to his men, which included a contingent from the young Fourth United States

Dismounted Cavalry (Venture Crew 1872), to push against the rebel leaders, just beyond the trees.

A few hours before, at the morning's routine Officers Call, all the leaders of the units who would participate in the battle gathered for brandy, cigars, and the weekend's battle plan. These morning meetings are tradition and serve more than just a social purpose. It is here that the host unit announces the day's battle and each unit's assignment.

For this reenactment, the Battle of Vicksburg, the Union was going to take the win, just as they had done more than a century prior. The host unit laid out the battle plan they had choreographed for the event.

“Okay,” the host unit directed, addressing the cavalry leadership. “You’ll open with the cavalry moving down the road and go ahead and start fighting and start the artillery up. After five to ten minutes of artillery fire, then the infantry will come out and you’ll push back and forth and eventually the rebels will fall back.” Unit leaders nodded their understanding. They retreated to tell their soldiers the day's battle script.

In May and June of 1863, the Federal army deployed a column of men out into battle, effectively sweeping attacking rebels off the field of battle. This five to one ratio was the decisive factor handing the win to the Union in the actual Battle of Vicksburg. On the reenacting field in the twenty-first century, however, things had, as is typical in war reenactments, gone quickly awry. Unlike reality, both the Union and Confederate contingents were equal in number. The rebel soldiers leveraged this advantage to their benefit and refused to give up ground.

Venture Crew 1872 was paired with the rest of the dismounted cavalry stationed behind the infantry. Light and quick, it was their job to protect the bulk of the fighting force and make sure the battle played out according to the script. So when the rebels at Vicksburg stubbornly held their ground, Venture Crew 1872 sprung into action.

Rerouting around the edge of the field, Venture Crew 1872 plunged into wooded cover to sneak behind, surprise, and surround the Confederate rebels. Across a creek, up a bank, and ducking under branches, the group emerged from the trees and flanked the Confederate leadership, encircling them in a tight cluster. Finally, the rebels gave in to the surge, calling their front attacking troops back into retreat so the Union army could take the win as scheduled. Venture Crew 1872's big battle rescue raised their reenacting stock still more and led older reenactors to offer their congratulations.

Many reenactors see their duty as two-fold: to represent the historical reality of battle and to amuse spectators who have come out to watch the show. Divvying up concerns of historical and entertainment concerns is a fluctuating process. On the one hand, reenactors are not creators. At the same time, there is a slight desperation to maintain interest in a dying American pastime. Venture Crew 1872 is not immune from navigating this fine divide.

While the adult leaders encourage the young members to read history books and take them on field trips to visit the actual historic sites where battles were fought and monuments built, the lure of black powder pyrotechnics and playing soldier always threatens to overpower the focus. Glass is constantly aware and vigilant of how his charges relate to the hobby. For the most part, Venture Crew 1872 members make him

proud, demonstrating maturity and connection to the scenarios reenacted beyond even many of the older reenactors.

“It’s corny, but you get a profound feeling, like you are experiencing something not many people do and you kind of let your imagination run,” Itoh says.

This profound notion of something more is what sustains Venture Crew 1872. Thousands have been given the opportunity to relive at least the spirit of a Civil War battle through participation with Venture Crew 1872—with roughly 20 new members added each year for the past 15 years and an annual summer camp program reaching another 600 to 800 students.

Of course, most Venture Crew 1872 members eventually grow up and age out of the program, going on to college, starting families, getting their first jobs. Growing a little grayer and a little slower with each year, Glass remains constant through all of the turnover, still reenacting with his young crew. He’s proud of the leadership opportunities Venture Crew 1872 offers its members. “I think the chance to build the friendships and the camaraderie with members of the crew and to go do something extraordinary [like reenacting], builds memories of accomplishment, of teamwork, or participating in something together,” Glass says. “There are all the different skills of being able to speak in front of people, of teaching people new things, young guys having to drill and teach the company and building the confidence that you know what you are doing and can lead and teach something.”

Waterford



WATERFORD

I can still read ‘WATERFORD’ on the big rock slab in front of the empty lot. Grass has grown high in front of the yellowed surface, partially obscuring the name. I fill in the blanks.

Behind the giant slab—expensively chipped and sanded such that passerby might assume the rectangular rock is a naturally occurring part of the landscape—is the Waterford Information Center. My father pulls into the half-circle driveway out front, parking in front of a low wall abutting the drive. Manufactured rock steps, two sets for two buildings, pop out of the ground. Four steps to nowhere. The buildings that are supposed to go with them are long gone.

While I take photos to illustrate my hastily scrawled written notes, my dad remains in the car, staring at the slab. He doesn’t need help remembering Waterford.

I climb back into the car and my dad nudges the car onto Highway 1431. We’re on a field trip of sorts, visiting a coulda-been, shoulda-been, never-was golf course in Central Texas. My dad used to make this drive every day, taking the same turns he’s taking now as he headed to his Waterford office. Every day he would walk in, grab a cup of coffee and greet his coworkers before settling into his desk for another day at his dream job.

Very quickly it becomes apparent that my dad is taking me on a tour of the way life is ‘supposed to be.’

“This was only supposed to be the work entrance. The main, pretty entrance was going to be built out to the highway so people could get in and out easier.”

“That was going to be the golf cart shed and engineering center.”

“If everything had happened the way it was planned, houses would line both sides of this street.”

Pointing to a long, flat valley on our left, my dad says, “That was supposed to be the private airport and that was supposed to be the equestrian center. Those rock structures on your right are supposed to hold water for the houses that would have been built up here.” We wind through Waterford down the main road, ignoring the many asphalt arms branching off into the property. Most of them end in cul-de-sacs anyway. “It’s easier to maximize home views overlooking the golf course that way,” my dad explains.

Little cities of pipe poke out of the earth at regular intervals, indicating where utilities have already been laid into the ground. Unfortunately, with no homes or buildings or residents to service, their installations had been accidental funerals.

My dad pulls up to the only completed building on Waterford’s property, the maintenance facilities. It’s a large U-shaped building that would have housed the fleet of golf carts, a golf cart repair shop, the superintendent’s offices and construction materials like sand, gravel and pipe. Instead, it houses Cash, a young man hired to live here and make sure the land doesn’t fall entirely to ruin. He’s built a small fire pit from relocated rocks in front of the building and stacked deer skulls in a giant pile atop a second rock slab bearing the name “Waterford.” Without these touches it would be impossible to guess the last time a human stood on this land.

Back on the main road, my dad pulls off in front of what looks like a little house. There are two peaks where the sides of the roof join together. On one side is a chimney.

A tunnel makes up the other half of the structure, perfect for protecting a parked golf cart. This, my dad tells me, is one of two comfort stations on the property. Finished, it would have featured ice and vending machines, bathrooms, a refuge from the rain. We try to figure out where everything would be—the toilet here, the sinks there, maybe a sitting area over there—but it’s hard to make sense of the maze of wood and pipes inside.

A cart path extends behind the comfort station to the Number Four green. The cement is beautiful, a soft rust color my dad identifies as San Diego Buff. Down the path, across a bridge and up a hill, we can see all the way down the hole, from green to tee box.

My dad points out the plant infrastructure—the Bent Grass greens, the Zeon Zoysia fairways, the Buffalo roughs—all still intact. The bunkers, too, look good, filled with Texas Best White, an angular sand that packs nicely and stays in place—apparently for years. It has been six years since anything was being built in earnest on this land, but my dad is confident in his assessment that Waterford only needs a little superficial surgery to become what it was always destined to be.

Invisible to my father, apparently, are the weeds poking through browning grass. Netting ringing the top of each bunker is exposed, proof that sand has slid out of place with time. Waterford isn’t perfect, though I suspect it always will be to him.

“This is sad.” We’re back in the car, leaving the comfort station behind us.

“You don’t know the half of it,” my dad answers.

Alan Wooley, 55, likes to talk about three things—golf, business, and history. He is short and round and still has a full head of thick hair, more white than anything else. My dad likes cheap beer and football. He likes trading in cars for fresher models, whether

there was anything wrong with his current ride or not. Trading gossip about golf politics makes him feel important. My dad has big social aspirations.

With a semester left, he dropped out of college to attend Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) school, becoming a certified golf professional. His game was already a zero handicap, meaning he took the score he earned rather than adjusting it to fit his skill level, but now he had the management training and accreditation to help him find a job in the sport. It didn't take long before my dad found himself working for a man named David Price, of the Bent Tree Country Club. Price was a golf professional at the top of his field and widely recognized as a 'maker' in the golf profession. Working for him as an assistant golf professional for a year meant one had the resources and the clout to go almost anywhere they wanted as a head golf professional. Eventually, my dad hoped, he would have a life like Price's. Well-respected and well-known in the golf community, Price could play at any course in the country; his wife's closets were larger than my parents' apartment at the time; and he got to play a round of golf nearly every day.

After his apprenticeship year was up, my dad went to Victoria, Texas to become the new golf professional and store manager for Victoria Country Club. Then he worked for Colony Creek Country Club. A few years after that he moved to Buda, Texas to work as a managing golf professional at Plum Creek Country Club. Because of bad management, turns in the economy, and his own restlessness, my dad never stayed anywhere long enough to build a legacy or earn the paycheck he wanted. He became an average managing professional at average golf courses.

Despite his mediocre career, my dad's charisma and commitment to networking did increase his stock in the golf world. As he cycled through jobs, shifting laterally from one to the next, he climbed the ranks from a member of the PGA to President of the South Texas Board of Directors and then to member of the National Board of Directors. With this last appointment, my dad was rubbing shoulders with guys who had David Price-level careers, cash to burn, and enjoyed drinking and hyperbole just as much as he did.

Showmanship is not a trait exclusive to my father. The more time he spent in the company of men who actively bragged about what they had, the more frustrated he grew with his current position in life in comparison.

Which is why, when his old friend Jimmy Terry called about a luxury golf course under construction in Central Texas, my dad leaped.

Eventually, the asphalt road ends. It leads all the way up to a giant concrete slab with pipes upright and tilted up. This slab would have been the first building of the clubhouse village. "It got framed up too, but the wood rotted because it was never covered," my dad says. "This was going to be the golf shop, with the frill on the other end with a deck overlooking Hole Ten and the marina. My office was going to be where that wet spot is."

My dad still remembers everything about this place, the way things were supposed to be. "Even like it is right now, you can see the potential."

He pulls the car over. When the road ended, we pushed forward onto the narrow cart paths. If a tire slips off onto the grass once in a while, well, it's not like anybody is

playing here anymore and needs pristine conditions. Driving past the point where the asphalt ends, we pass the low-level marina. “We were going to make it possible for boats to dock in there, get out, and come eat at the grill.” We drive over a gorgeous red bridge that overlooks at least six holes. Finally, we circle around stepped hills, built up with rock walls to keep the carefully sculpted landscape from eroding.

We keep going, my dad pointing out all the holes we cruise by—Nine, Eleven (the hardest hole on the golf course). We stop at Thirteen.

“This is my favorite view.” My dad cups his hand over his eyes to look out from the overlook by the Thirteen tee box. My dad describes the beauty the best way he knows how. “Some of these home sites would have been one million dollars, just because of the view.”

Back in the car, I point to an undulating fairway outside my window. It’s almost completely brown. Wouldn’t the entire course have to be reseeded, at enormous cost, if this land was to be spruced back into playable shape?

“Actually, with that type of grass, it isn’t dead. Just dormant.” This is my dad’s main line. Waterford is just on hold. The plan remains salvageable. The fantasy is still alive.

“This land was going to be the plot for Jimmy’s house. It was part of the compensation package he got when they hired him.” My dad is pointing at a patch of shrubs behind the second tee of this abandoned golf course. I follow his finger and stare at the brush. The way my dad had built up this moment (“There is one more thing I want

to show you. One more thing you have to see before we leave.”), I had expected something a little more majestic than a three-foot, scraggly tangle of bramble and leaves.

“Ah.”

We are standing on the second tee at Waterford, a luxury golf course that sprawls across 500 acres in Central Texas. Well, that’s a bit misleading. We are standing on what would be a luxury golf course in Central Texas. But egos and money and natural forces beyond anybody’s control got in the way, leaving the manicured land lonely.

My dad likes to say the land is in reparable disrepair. Meaning that, although a superintendent hasn’t closely tended the course or replanted in years, “the bones are here. The skeleton is here. All it would take is some money and some time, but we could bring this place back.”

We. I don’t know who might make up this concept of the ‘we’ my dad is nursing.

My dad moves his arm up, so his finger is no longer pointing into scraggly plants but instead out toward the horizon. We are atop a hill and the sky is clear and clean and I can see why this land was chosen for the project in the first place. Faded gray hills scallop the horizon, miles and miles away. Below us, the ‘bones’ of the golf course stretch out. From this vantage point, Waterford still looks beautiful and ready to play. The netting curling out of the ground, the brown patches of weed and dead grass—all the imperfections vanish with distance. I can see three fairways, long and lean and crisscrossing the valley below. The Texas Hill Country is known for its stunning sunsets, and I can perfectly imagine the way reds and purples would lay atop the hills in the distance on summer evenings. This is the type of land where you build a big porch and buy a rocking chair and you actually use it.

Jimmy was the guy who recruited my dad for the Waterford project, promising the same successes and grandeur and renown that he had been promised by the developers. Jimmy's dream became my father's dream. Sometimes they would carpool to work, twisting through the hill country and watching the sun fling out its rays during its early morning climb. The two men believed they would watch that ascent for the rest of their lives.

I wonder how many times Jimmy visited his plot of land, this plot of land, just to look and dream. Then I wonder how many times my dad has visited Jimmy's plot of land, still dreaming.

When Waterford was still a reality, my dad gave dozens of tours of the property to potential investors and residents. Cruising around to show me the course today, he fell into autopilot. Here is this hole, that green, this building. Comments about the effects of six years of inattention pepper his old script. My dad is still selling Waterford, still convinced it could be great.

"I keep my ears open," my dad admits. "I'd love to come back. I'd love to finish it. I'd quit my job tomorrow to come back and finish this place." We backtrack through the rest of deserted golf course in silence.

In true Texas form, this early January morning is brisk, clear, bright. In another life, people would be living here. We would be passing cars as we follow the winding main road back to the temporary entrance. Our view of the horizon would be interrupted by houses. We would be yielding to kids riding their bikes through the neighborhood or

running after an errant basketball. My dad would be teeing off for a round of golf with a batch of club members. But that's another life.