

PROLOGUE

You could see it in his nervous eyes. You could see it in his shaking hands. You could see it in the three prescription bottles in his room: one to steady his galloping heart rate, one to reduce his anxiety, one to minimize his nightmares. You could see it in the screensaver on his laptop—a nuclear fireball and the words **FUCK IRAQ**—and in the private journal he had been keeping since he arrived.

His first entry, on February 22:

Not much going on today. I turned my laundry in, and we're getting our TAT boxes. We got mortared last night at 2:30 a.m., none close. We're at FOB Rustamiyah, Iraq. It's pretty nice, got a good chow hall and facilities. Still got a bunch of dumb shit to do though. Well, that's about it for today.

His last entry, on October 18:

I've lost all hope. I feel the end is near for me, very, very near. Darkness is all I see anymore.

So he was finished. Down to his final hours, he was packed, weaponless, under escort, and waiting for the helicopter that would take him away to a wife who had just told him on the phone: "I'm scared of what you might do."

"You know I'd never hurt you," he'd said, and he'd hung up, wandered around the FOB, gotten a haircut, and come back to his room, where he now said, "But what if she's right? What if I snap someday?"

It was a thought that made him feel sick. Just as every thought now made him

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

feel sick. "You spend a thousand days, it gets to the point where it's Groundhog Day. Every day is over and over. The heat. The smell. The language. There's nothing sweet about it. It's all sour," he said. He remembered the initial invasion, when it wasn't that way. "I mean it was a front seat to the greatest movie I've ever seen in my life." He remembered the firefights of his second deployment. "I loved it. Anytime I get shot at in a firefight, it's the sexiest feeling there is." He remembered how this deployment began to feel bad early on. "I'd get in the Humvee and be driving down the road and I would feel my heart pulsing up in my throat." That was the start of it, he said, and then Emory happened, and then Crow happened, and then he was in a succession of explosions, and then a bullet was skimming across his thighs, and then Doster happened, and then he was waking up thinking, "Holy shit, I'm still here, it's misery, it's hell," which became, "Are they going to kill me today?" which became, "I'll take care of it myself," which became, "Why do that? I'll go out killing as many of them as I can, until they kill me.

"I didn't give a fuck," he said. "I wanted it to happen. Bottom line—I wanted it over as soon as possible, whether they did it or I did it."

The amazing thing was that no one knew. Here was all this stuff going on, pounding heart, panicked breathing, sweating palms, electric eyes, and no one regarded him as anything but the great soldier he'd always been, the one who never complained, who hoisted bleeding soldiers onto his back, who'd suddenly begun insisting on being in the right front seat of the lead Humvee on every mission, not because he wanted to be dead but because that's what selfless leaders would do.

He was the great soldier who one day walked to the aid station and went through the door marked combat stress and asked for help and now was on his way home.

Now he was remembering what the psychologist had told him: "With your stature, maybe you've opened the door for a lot of guys to come in."

"That made me feel really good," he said. And yet he had felt so awful the previous day when he told one of his team leaders to round up everyone in his squad.

"What'd we do now?"

"You didn't do anything," he said. "Just get them together."

They came into his room, and he shut the door and told them he was leaving the following day. He said the hard part: that it was a mental health evacuation. He said to them, "I don't even know what I'm going through. I know that I don't feel right."

DAVID FINKEL

"Well, how long?" one of his soldiers said, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," he said. "There's a possibility I won't be coming back."

They had rallied around him then, shaking his hand, grabbing his arm, patting his back, and saying whatever nineteen- and twenty-year-olds could think of to say.

"Take care of yourself," one of them said.

"Drink a beer for me," another said.

He had never felt so guilt-ridden in his life.

Early this morning, they had driven away on a mission, leaving him behind, and after they'd disappeared, he had no idea what to do. He stood there for a while alone. Eventually he walked back to his room. He turned up his air conditioner to high. When he got cold enough to shiver, he put on warmer clothes and stayed under the vents. He packed his medication. He stacked some packages of beef jerky and mac 'n' cheese and smoked oysters, which he wouldn't be able to take with him, for the soldiers he was leaving behind and wrote a note that said "Enjoy."

Finally it was time to go to the helicopter, and he began walking down the hall. Word had spread through the entire company by now, and when one of the soldiers saw him, he came over. "Well, I'll walk you as far as the shitters, because I have to go to the bathroom," the soldier said, and as last words, those would have to do, because those were the last words he heard from any of the soldiers in his battalion as his deployment came to an end.

His stomach hurt as he made his way across the FOB. He felt himself becoming nauseated. At the landing area, other soldiers from other battalions were lined up, and when the helicopter landed, everyone was allowed to board except him. He didn't understand.

"Next one's yours," he was told, and when it came in a few minutes later, he realized why he'd had to wait. It had a big red cross on the side. It was the helicopter for the injured and the dead.

That was him, Adam Schumann.

He was injured. He was dead. He was done.

Two years later: Adam drops the baby.

The baby, who is four days old, is his son, and there is a moment as he is falling that this house he has come home to seems like the most peaceful place in the world. Outside is the cold dead of 3:00 a.m. on a late-November night in Kansas, but inside is lamplight, the warm smell of a newborn, and Adam's wife, Saskia, beautiful Saskia, who a few minutes before had asked her husband if he could watch the baby so she could get a little sleep. "I got it," he had said. "I got it. Get some rest." She curled up in the middle of their bed, and the last thing she glimpsed was Adam reclined along the edge, his back against the headboard and the baby in his arms. He was smiling, as if contentment for this wounded man were possible at last, and she believed it enough to shut her eyes, just before he shut his. His arms soon relaxed. His grip loosened. The baby rolled off of his chest and over the edge of the bed, and here came that peaceful moment, the baby in the air, Adam and Saskia asleep, everyone oblivious, the floor still a few inches away, and now, with a crack followed by a thud, the moment is over and everything that will happen is under way.

Saskia is the one who hears it. It is not loud, but it is loud enough. Her eyes fly open. She sees Adam closed-eyed and empty-armed, and only when he hears screaming and feels the sharp elbows and knees of someone scrambling across him does he wake up from the sleep he had promised he didn't need. It takes him a second or two. Then he knows what he has done.

He says nothing. There is nothing he can say. He is sorry. He is always

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

sorry now. He has been sorry for two years, ever since he slunk home from the war. He watches his wife scoop up the baby. He keeps watching, wishing she would look at him, willing her to, always so in need of forgiveness, but she won't. She clutches the crying baby as he dresses and leaves the room. He sits for a while in the dark, listening to her soothe the baby, and then he goes outside, gets into his pickup truck, and positions a shotgun so that it is propped up and pointed at his face. In that way, he starts driving, while back in the house, Saskia is trying to understand what happened. A crack. A thud. The thud was the floor, and thank God for the ugly carpet. But what was the crack? The bed frame? The nightstand?

This baby. So resilient. Breathing evenly. Not even a mark. Somehow fine. How can that be? But he is. Maybe he is one of the lucky ones, born to be okay. Saskia lies with him, then gets up and comes back with a plastic bottle of water. She drops it from the side of the bed and listens to the sound it makes as it hits the floor.

She drops a pair of heavy shoes and watches them bounce.

She finds a basketball and rolls it off the edge.

She fills a drink container with enough water to weigh about as much as the baby, and as Adam continues driving and considering the gun, not yet, not yet, not yet, not yet, she rolls that off the edge, too.

Two years. He is twenty-eight now, is out of the army, and has gained back some weight. When he left the war as the great Sergeant Schumann, he was verging on gaunt. Twenty-five pounds later, he is once again solid, at least physically. Mentally, though, it is still the day he headed home. Emory, shot in the head, is still draped across his back, and the blood flowing out of Emory's head is still rivering into his mouth. Doster, whom he might have loved the most, is being shredded again and again by a roadside bomb on a mission Adam was supposed to have been on, too, and after Doster is declared dead another soldier is saying to him, "None of this shit would have happened if you were there." It was said as a soldier's compliment—Adam had the sharpest eyes, Adam always found the hidden bombs, everyone relied on Adam—but that wasn't how he

heard it then or hears it now. It might as well have been shrapnel, the way those words cut him apart. It was his fault. It is his fault. The guilt runs so deep it defines him now. He's always been such a good guy, people say of Adam. He's the one people are drawn to, who they root for, smart, decent, honorable, good instincts, that one. And now? "I feel completely broken," Adam says.

"He's still a good guy" is what Saskia says. "He's just a broken good guy."

She says it as an explanation of why on some days she has hope that he will once again be the man he was before he went to war. It's not as if he caused this. He didn't. It's not as if he doesn't want to get better. He does. On other days, though, it seems more like an epitaph, and not only for Adam. All the soldiers he went to war with—the 30 in his platoon, the 120 in his company, the 800 in his battalion—came home broken in various degrees, even the ones who are fine. "I don't think anyone came back from that deployment without some kind of demons they needed to work out," one of those soldiers who was with Adam says.

"I'm sure I need help," another says, after two years of night sweats and panic attacks.

"Constant nightmares, anger issues, and anytime I go into a public place I have to know what everyone is doing all the time," another of them says.

"Depression. Nightmares of my teeth falling out," another says.

"I get attacked at home," another says. "Like I'm sitting in my house and I get attacked by Iraqis. That's how it works. Weird-ass dreams."

"It has been more than two years, and he's still beating me," the wife of another says. "My hair is falling out. I have a bite scar on my face. Saturday he was screaming at me about how I was a fucking bitch because I didn't have the specific TV he wanted hooked up."

"Other than that, though," the one who might be in the best shape of all says with an embarrassed laugh, after mentioning that his wife tells him he screams every night as he falls asleep. He sounds bewildered by this, as do they all.

"I have to admit a day doesn't go by that I don't think about those days, the boys we lost, and what we did," another says. "But life goes on."

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

Out of one war into another. Two million Americans were sent to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. Home now, most of them describe themselves as physically and mentally healthy. They move forward. Their war recedes. Some are even stronger for the experience. But then there are the others, for whom the war endures. Of the two million, studies suggest that 20 to 30 percent have come home with post-traumatic stress disorder—PTSD—a mental health condition triggered by some type of terror, or traumatic brain injury—TBI—which occurs when a brain is jolted so violently that it collides with the inside of the skull and causes psychological damage. Depression, anxiety, nightmares, memory problems, personality changes, suicidal thoughts: every war has its after-war, and so it is with the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have created some five hundred thousand mentally wounded American veterans.

How to grasp the true size of such a number, and all of its implications, especially in a country that paid such scant attention to the wars in the first place? One way would be to imagine the five hundred thousand in total, perhaps as points on a map of America, all suddenly illuminated at once. The sight would be of a country glowing from coast to coast.

And another way would be to imagine them one at a time, starting with the one who is out in the middle of a Kansas night, driving around and around unseen. Toward dawn, he returns home. He doesn't mention to Saskia where he has been, or what he had been thinking, and she doesn't ask. Instead, the shotgun is put away, the baby awakens for his next feeding, their other child, who is six and anxious and has begun wetting her bed, awakens after doing so again, and a breaking family whose center has become Adam's war wounds gets on with another day of trying to recover, followed by another day after that.