

I Wish I Could Say This to Your Face

by Jim Harrington

You bullied me into being your friend, with your threats and name-calling. Even in high school you wouldn't let go, not until you enlisted in the Army. You tried to shame me into signing up. I finally said no and braced for a response that never happened.

I missed you when you left and disliked myself for it.

The day you came home, after three extended tours in Afghanistan, I wanted to welcome you at the bus station, but I was afraid you'd attach yourself to me again. My therapist understood, said it was why I had so few friends, said the decision was mine. Damn him.

I hid the picture you gave me the day before you left. I didn't want you staring at me, making me feel guilty for not going with you.

When I heard you were coming home for good, I took the picture out and wondered if you looked the same. Being in a war had to change people, just like missing a friend stopped the hate and anger and replaced them with confusion.

Mom said I spent too much time talking about you as if you were some kind of hero. I hadn't realized I was.

I remember the first time I heard you swear. You fell off the playground swing, skinned your knees, and said, "Fuck!"

The teacher blotted the skin with a tissue and said if you ever spoke that word again, she would wash your mouth out with soap. Later, on the bus, you leaned over and whispered fuck in my ear, while the teacher stood outside the window chatting with somebody's mother.

You swear a lot more now. I don't know why and wish you'd stop.

You came home on a rainy Sunday. The Greyhound stopped at the post office. I stayed where I was, looking out of the window of Bert's

Diner, cradling a cup of cold coffee, and watched you exit the bus, wearing your fatigues, a duffle bag hanging from your shoulder.

I told my therapist you were coming. He asked me how I felt about that. I said conflicted. He nodded and tapped a pen on the tip of his nose. I wondered if he was trying to hypnotize me.

He said I should be there when you arrived. It would help me figure out how I felt. I nodded, my back to him. Do you think I'm gay, I asked. Do you, he replied. I wanted to take his pen and tap my nose.

Remember the time I brought you home for dinner? Mom's face sharpened to a fine-honed scowl when we arrived late. I worried she might cut you with it. She served loose hamburger, mashed potatoes and corn—my favorite dinner, ten years ago.

You mixed it all together like she said to and finished every bite. The best meal I've had in a long time, you said. Her face softened. She said there was more. You thanked her but declined, rubbed your belly instead and said you wanted to stay in shape. You told her I should go running with you in the morning. You laughed. I snorted. The next morning you and I went jogging.

It took me three weeks to ask you about the war, especially if you'd killed anyone. You had. You thought. We mostly fired over long distances, you said, and it was hard to tell if we actually shot anyone. They fired a lot of bullets, and we fired a lot of bullets, and then we all stopped.

I asked if it bothered you that you might have. Nah, they deserved it for flying those planes into our buildings and bombing our embassies, you replied.

Later, while we sat on swings at the school playground, you told me you'd lied. The only time you fired your rifle was at basic training. You spent your whole deployment walking the streets guarding your LT while he spoke to the natives. I stared at two boys playing catch and thanked you for serving. Really, you asked. Really, I replied.

My mother says I'm an adulterer. I tell her I can't be. I'm not married. She says that doesn't matter.

I spend too much time with you, she complains. It 's not natural. She continues knitting and rocking. I tell her we are just friends, not lovers. My cheeks warm at the sound of the word. She says a few more sentences, then the bedroom falls silent, except for the clicking needles. I stare at nothing, my mind frozen, unable to break free, to move on.

The needles click. The yarn unravels. Mother looks up, says I'm an adulterer. I tell her I can't be. I'm not married. She says it doesn't matter.

She's too young to be this old.

I swipe one of the french fries from your plate. You reach for it. I hold it away and laugh. You smile and laugh, too. You didn't used to be like this. Before, you would laugh, but it was an ugly laugh, a shield.

You get up, walk around the table, grab at the fry. I move my arm. You try again. This time you clutch my wrist. Your hip settles against my shoulder. Except for when you used to punch me in the arm, it's the first time we've touched. I like it, and I don't.

I tell Mom I'm going on a vacation to Florida. Just a week. Six days, really. She says I can't go. She needs me. I know, I say. It's him, she says. No, I say. She stares at me, her eyes tightening into knots. I hold her gaze for a few seconds, then look away. I know, she says. You're gay. I am not, I say. But I wonder.

I walk to the bed. Sit on the edge. Tell her I need to get away. To think. I don't tell her I won't be back.

I liked you better as a bully. I understood that, could deal with it. Now I don't now what we are. I only know I need to go away to find out.

I wish your parents hadn't moved here. I wish I hadn't been assigned to be your buddy. I wish either of those statements was true.

I wish . . . I wish I wasn't so confused.

