Preface

Two years ago I was a newlywed and a college student only a few classes away from graduation. The world seemed uncomplicated. Now, all I can say for sure is that I am no longer a college student, no longer illusioned by new love, and I don’t feel young anymore. My quiet optimism has been replaced by something darker, a kind of hatred-of what, I cannot even grasp or imagine.

 I was raised in a small town in northeast Florida. I spent my summers playing war in the swamps behind my parents’ house, listening eagerly at my father’s side as he told me about his war, and I yearned. I grew larger every year, filling out, my voice deepening, but this childhood ambition continued in its flimsy state of idiocy until I was called to my own war.

 I had spent three years in the 101st Airborne Division and then I enrolled at Florida State University. To pay for my education, I enlisted in the Florida National Guard, what I thought was a joke of an organization willing to pay for the entire cost of my education in return for one weekend a month, two weeks a year. I continued to wonder, as all men do, how I would deal with the bear of war. I studied, loved, and continued as civilians do, in ignorance, for four years.

 In my final year, with two credits left, I was sent to Kuwait, and then to Iraq. We were promised short tours, three months, six at most.

 We crossed the berm the same day as the army’s Third Infantry Division, leading the invasion of Iraq. When the Third Division was sent home, our National Guard unit was passed around the armed forces like a virus: the 108th Airborne, First Marine Expeditionary, 101st Airborne, and finally the Armored Division. They were all sent home, heroes of the war. Meanwhile, my unit stayed on, my soul rotting, our unit outlasted by no one in our tenure there. The Florida National Guard, forgotten, unnoticed-at one point the government even declared that we had been pulled out of Baghdad and brought home, although all around us the capital of our enemy seethed.

 Baghdad had apparently been captured, our president had declared the end of the war. I watched our warriors be replaced by occupiers, peacekeepers, and still I slept every night in the dragon’s den. I awoke every time it was my turn and I crossed the threshold of our perimeter into the city streets, wondering if my luck would run out as it had for my good friend when he emptied his brains into his Kevlar helmet on the side of a shit-infested street on the banks of the Tigris River.

 This book is the story of a group of college students, American boys who wanted nothing to do with someone else’s war. It is *our* story. The world hears war stories told my reporters and retired generals who keep extensive notebooks and journals. They carry pens as they walk, whereas I carried a machine gun.

 War stories are told to those that have not experienced the worse in man. And to the listener’s ears they can sound like glory and heroism. People mutter phrases like, “I don’t know how you did it.” And “I could never have done that.” And they look at you wondering how you have changed, wondering if you have forever lost the moral dilemma associated with taking another person’s life.

 All we do in the army is tell stories to each other. I like that oral tradition, if you could call it that. I feel like it’s the best way to tell these stories. I wrote most of the stories while in Iraq, the rest just after I returned. I hope all of these stories continue to convey the immediacy of when and where and how they were composed.

 I have too many of these stories to tell, and if just a few of them get read, the ones that real people will understand, then maybe someone will know what we did here. It won’t assuage the suffering inside me, inside all of us. It won’t bring back anyone’s son or brother or wife. It will simply make people aware, if only for one glimmering moment, of what war is really like.

 As much as I feel like this book is the story of innocence not lost but stolen, of lies and blackness-a story not of the insanity of war, but of the insanity of men-I should also share a few words from my father, from a phone conversation we had about halfway through my time in Iraq. He said to me, “Son, of all the things I wanted to see you achieve, a combat infantry badge was the last. It is also the one I am most proud of you for.”