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Semper Fidelis: Always Faithful

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Semper Fidelis: Always Faithful

Carol Pelz

Mike left for Marine boot camp on September 8, 2014. His plane departed from New York City and landed in Parris Island, South Carolina. Hell on Earth, as he described it. Beautiful on the outside, torture once you passed through the gates. Which, of course, he did.

This wasn't an experiment in distance. This wasn't an experiment involving 1,000 miles and seven states that acted as an unforgiving fortress between him and me. This wasn't an experiment involving pens that dried out, fragile

lead that broke every time, and the ripping of the crinkly ends of notebook paper so that only a precise crisp edge was left. This was an experiment of him and me. Mike was the independent variable, ever-changing. I was the dependent variable, a result of his decisions. Mike's enlisting in the Marines changed the path we were following, one which began in the tenth grade, hand in hand, always together. Suddenly, there was about to be a split in our road for the first time since we were fifteen. Ultimately, I made the decision to remain on the path with

Layout and opening photograph by Zach Barlow. Background paper image by Flickr user Chris Palmieri, CC BY-SA 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cpalmieri/14769900>.

him, my hand clasped tightly in his until the day he left. Mike and I are only able to communicate through letters now, which I reflect on often.

2300, Parris Island

Write as much as you want baby, I like to stay up and read them.

Sirens sing me to sleep most nights now. What sound sings Mike to sleep? Is it the frantic sound of secret writing, stealthy thieves pilfering words in the shadowy night? Or is Mike the one being robbed? Being robbed of time to write to his family, being robbed of sleep, being robbed of comfort? No one believes a recruit will get a decent amount of sleep at boot camp. I at least thought Mike would get enough sleep that he would be able to rest his weary eyes. I didn't think his eyelids would weigh him down like an anchor, heavy steel constantly dragging him under. Exhaustion was a well-known enemy to Mike before he went to basic training, an enemy who always kept the fight dragging on for too damn long, never compromising, never allowing for peace. Thoughts often kept him up at night, nagging at him like flies. Now Mike denies the Sandman, ignores his drooping eyelids, just to read my messily scrawled words, elaborate musical notes to his worn-out eyes. Words of reassurance, words of comfort, words from me to him.

0700, Parris Island

I'm at the dentist! I'm gonna be losing my wisdom teeth today, hopefully it goes good. It's like 7ish and I've been just waiting and waiting.

It didn't go good :(It really was

painful. They said they were going to treat us really good, but it was bad.

Mike's drill instructor gave him a bulleted list of instructions as he entered the dentist's office to wait for his surgery. **Do NOT lay in your rack with gauze in your mouth. Falling asleep with gauze in your mouth is a major breathing risk. Take your medication as directed. Keep well hydrated with water, juices, and Gatorade type fluids.** He didn't even get halfway through the list before he turned it over and started to write a letter to me. A recruit is lucky if he gets time to write each night, between reading his required books, clearing his space, and holding ten-pound weights out in his completely straightened arms until he is praying to God he can just die already.

Mike's teeth clung to his gums, reluctant to leave. His surgery started at 0815 and ended at 1100. Three hours, four wisdom teeth. Bleeding gums, couldn't talk. Pain filled his mouth, waging a war on his gums. Their weapon was blood. So much blood. A couple of the recruits had been too loud at the dentist's office, so all the recruits in Mike's platoon had to run a mile immediately after the surgeries. One mile turned into two, which became three, and ended up being four. Can't breathe. Can't talk. Can't do this anymore.

1700, Parris Island

A boy in my platoon called out our Drill Sergeant. I took the blame but the Drill Sergeant called bullshit because I couldn't talk. Everyone started laughing, it was great.

A boy in Mike's platoon had the guts, or the plain stupidity, to call a drill instructor out on

his bullshit. When the sergeant demanded to know who had spoken, Mike took the blame by raising his hand. He opened his mouth to talk, and instantly the blood soaked his chapped lips. "Bullshit, you can't even talk!" the drill instructor screamed at Mike. The boys in the platoon tried to hold in their laughter and disbelief, but their faces broke into undeniable smiles, heads tilted down toward the ground to hide them. Mike had lightened the somber mood. He always does.

2300, Parris Island

I'm here without you baby, but you're still on my lonely mind. I think about you baby, and I dream about you all the time. I'm here without you baby, but you're still with me in my dreams. And tonight, it's only you and me.

The first time Mike and I talked about the song "Here Without You" by Three Doors Down, we were sitting in his kitchen making Jell-O. It was halfway through August, and I think we both felt the feelings that come only during tender summer nights. Carelessness swirled inside us. The nights were endless. Dark skies and light hearts. Loud laughter, quiet houses. Tired eyes, the most awake laughter. Tonight, our stomachs were full of chocolate rum cake. We were outside Walmart, a flimsy bag with three boxes of Jell-O—raspberry, orange, and banana—in our arms, when we saw the stand. The Catholic School from the town over was selling cakes for charity. Thick, rich frosting melted like butter in the sweltering summer atmosphere, the plastic cover offering no protection from the ever-present heat. We rescued the chocolate rum cake, a knight and a princess, sweeping up the cake before it melted

underneath the fiery breath of the dragon sun. It was safe until we devoured it in a booth in the back of McDonald's, with plastic forks held like pitchforks between our sweaty fingers.

The Jell-O was cooling as I sat cross-legged on a stool in Mike's kitchen while he leaned against the table, mixing water and cotton candy-blue powder like a chemist. A Jell-O mold rested on the table, outlining various animal shapes—lion, giraffe, elephant, zebra, monkey. I played with my toes as the music blaring from his iPod switched from an angsty male voice to something softer, more melodic: "A hundred days have made me older, since the last time that I saw your pretty face. A thousand lies have made me colder, and I don't think I'll ever look at this the same."

"Who do you think he's singing about?" Mike asked me.

I contemplated this for a moment before responding, "I don't know, probably some girl."

Mike opened his fridge, which was vacant except for two other bowls containing artificial red and mango orange liquid. "Why do you think he can't see her?"

"I don't know, sounds like he's in the military or something." I said this cautiously, carefully watching his face.

Mike had told me he'd enlisted in the Marines two weeks before this. It wasn't an easy time for me. It started with his ignoring me for weeks. He was Neptune, the coldest planet, constantly freezing me out, and I was Earth, small and blue with ocean tears. It took forever to get him to finally talk to me about what was going on. It just so happened I was driving by a gas station, the one his family used to own, when I saw him filling up the Mustang. I parked, got into his car, and refused to get out until he told me what was up. He told me he

Photograph by Flickr user DVIDSHUB, CC BY 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dvids/6238553350/>.

had enlisted in the Marines and could leave as early as next June, right after graduation.

"What about pole-vaulting, Mike? You know you are already getting scouted by colleges, and you still have one more season to go."

Mike had broken and set every pole vault record at our school over and over for the past three years. He was the section champion and went to State. God, every time I watched him pole-vault, I swore he could fly.

"Carol, you know I can't do that. If I could go to college and be content, I would. But I can't, and you know that. I need to do this, and I'm going to. Leave if you want, but I have to do this."

I could lie and say this was a surprise to me, but it wasn't. I knew the boy I had met in tenth grade wanted to be a Marine. He wanted to be brave. He wanted to be unafraid. He wanted to be a hero.

He just didn't realize he already was my hero.

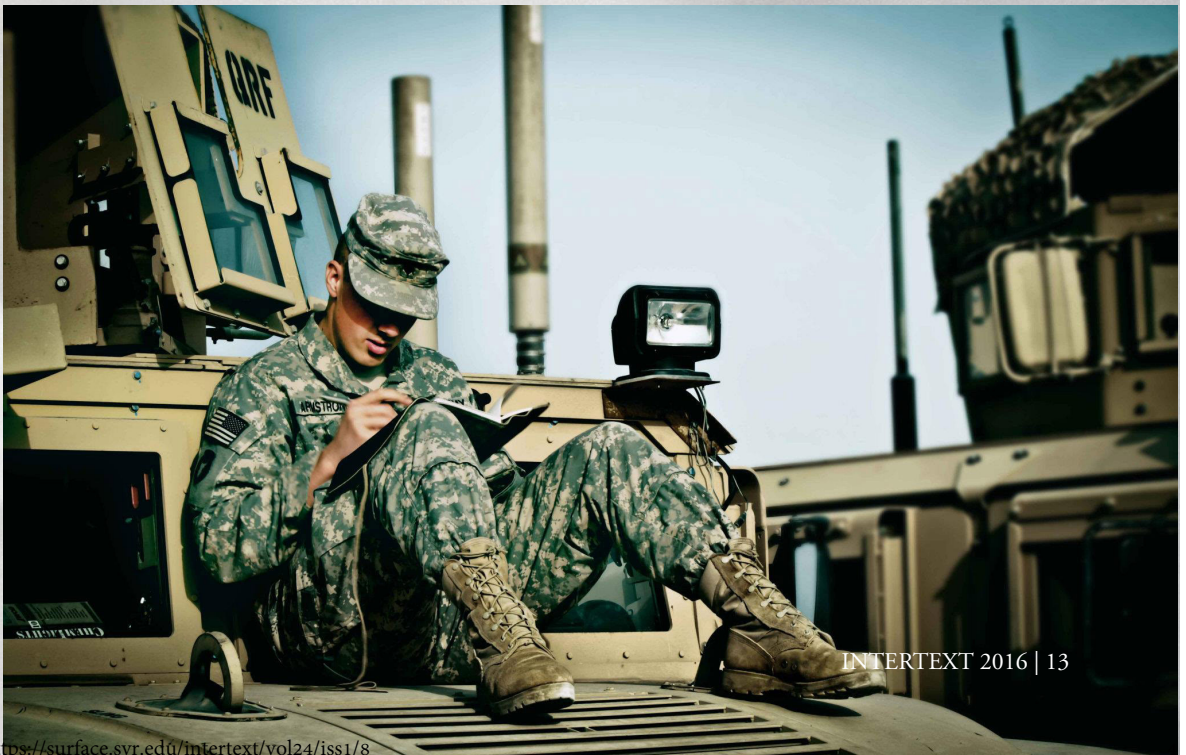
Back then, I didn't realize what the song was about. I didn't understand how it felt to be so far away from someone you loved. I didn't understand how the pain of loneliness felt sharper than the blade of any knife. I didn't understand how memories could pierce through your mind and make your stomach drop lower than the Mariana Trench is deep.

I get it now.

2400, Parris Island

**So let's just say pull up bar, shoelace, kid,
you figure it out.**

I stared at that piece of paper for a solid half hour. Mike always claims to love my naivety, my simplicity, but sometimes I am just too hopeful. I try to see the silver lining, the brilliant comet shooting through the empty, black sky. There





is no comet here. There is no silver lining in a recruit's feeling so overwhelmed and distressed that he tries to hang himself with tied-together shoelaces on a pull-up bar. There is no comet to light up this sky. It is dark. It is empty. Does that boy have a girl who writes to him every day? Does that boy have a family that threw him a going-away party before he left for boot camp? Did his proud family line the porch with balloons and hang signs wishing him the best of luck in training? Did they know he would get so distressed he would reach for his shoelaces in the dead of night, tie them together, and try to take his own life? No, they didn't know.

They probably still don't.

1700, Parris Island

We're gonna make an adventure this summer, you'll never forget ever, ever!

California. It had always been the dream. Mike has family there, so every summer he left for two weeks to visit them. The first summer he went, the summer before tenth grade, involved a teary goodbye, two weeks of nonstop texts, and

him surprising me when he came back, throwing rocks at my window and scaring the shit out of me. The last summer he went, the summer before college, I didn't even know he was going. I was getting ready for my best friend's graduation party, halfway through curling my hair and already late, when he pulled up in my driveway on his motorcycle. I watched him talk to my parents for about ten minutes before I decided to go outside, hair still only half-curled, to see what he had to say. We hadn't spoken in months. I was going off to college, and he was going into the Marines. Talking wouldn't have changed that. We were going on two different paths; or so I thought. This led to the first time I rode a motorcycle and the first time I decided to give someone a second chance.

We drove back to Mike's house on the motorcycle. I was already dressed for my friend's graduation party, and my floral shorts and flowy rose-colored tank top did not do well in the wind. Still, the wind blowing through my hair felt good. Once we got back to Mike's house, he told me he was going to California with his father. I was sad to hear he was leaving so soon, before I was to even leave for college. He told me I probably wouldn't get to see him again before he left for Parris Island. He was very matter-of-fact about it. Sometimes the timing just doesn't work out. The ticking of a clock is a very cruel thing. After talking for a couple of hours, I left for my friend's graduation party, and that night he left for California.

Sometimes life cuts you some slack. Mike ended up coming home from California two weeks before I left for college because of family reasons. Something changed in him during this time. I don't know what to attribute this to. I don't know if it was the endless hours on the back of the motorcycle when he had time

Photographs provided by Carol Pelz.

to think or all the different people he had met on his trip and talked to about the Marines, life, and the people you need in your life. Either way, we got back together a couple of days after he came back from California, and I had no doubt in my mind I had California to thank for this.

This summer wasn't going to involve a teary goodbye—well, I guessed it would when his leave was up, but no tears about California would be involved. The idea of Mike and me in California this summer became my saving grace; it was our promised land.

We all talk about what we miss most and what we are going to do when we get out, and literally all I want to do is see you.



Fall. Wind blows the golden and auburn puckered leaves through the crisp air. The sweet smell of apples fills my nostrils. Thick, chunky-knit sweaters cover my skin. I clutch my sleeves over my hands as the wind stings my nose and gives me earaches.

47 days.

The gas chamber. The gas blows into Mike's reddening face as he is forced to stand in the gas chamber. The chamber is made to teach recruits how to protect themselves and breathe calmly while wearing a protective mask. The

gas, the same gas police used to stop riots, burns his skin. It's a psychological test as well as a physical one. The recruits aren't allowed to leave the smoke-filled room until they have taken their masks off.

35 days

Winter. Crystal snow coats the ground, the perfect foundation for improv snow angels and slushy snowball wars between flirty campus couples. I pull my scarf tighter around my neck. Romanticism fills the freezing air. The fur of my parka tickles my goose-bumped neck and walking to Marshall Street to mail letters leaves me icy and red-cheeked.

14 days.

The Crucible. Sweat coats the recruits as they march. They march for over forty-five miles. They are subjected to fifty-four hours of hell. Sleep deprivation and lack of food is the name of the game. This is the defining moment for Mike, for every Marine, the point of basic training. Mike is excited for the Crucible, as it will be the first time he is in a real warlike situation. He is going to give it his all, no matter what. The recruits won't forget this experience for as long as they live.

Who would forget Hell?

10 days

Mike will leave Parris Island on December 6, 2014. His parents are driving down to South Carolina with his grandparents for Family Day and then his graduation ceremony. I will be taking my finals while he is home. Waiting to go home will be torturous, but it will all be worth it when I walk through the door and finally jump into his beautiful arms. Which, of course, I will.

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