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**November 8, 2016**

Shani Miller

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**November 8, 2016** Shani Miller

Outside the four walls of this chapel, voters wait in line to cast their ballots. Citizens hold their breath. Elsewhere, every eye is glued to television screens. The world waits for the rippling consequences of today's election. Will Hilary's lies deceive the world or Trump's narcissism set our nation on a hill of self-glorification?

Gazing at the stained-glass windows of this small chapel in Auburn, California, I breathe deeply. Clamoring voices and heated debates remain outside the vaulted wooden ceiling. Inside, gentle piano notes play, warm lights shine from chandeliers. This is the first time since being home from Iraq in the past two months that I've felt rest. The bloody battle of Mosul rages, and I pray God will protect Mustafa and Abbas as they fly their helicopters over ISIS occupied ground. As an Air Advisor, I supported these men in defeating ISIS in Fallujah and Q-West. Now, all I can do is pray for their victory. Leaning my face into my knees, the creaking pews remind me of the small chapel in Iraq, and for a moment, I feel home.

Sacredness remains in this somber space. Flashbacks and nightmares from Iraq and Afghanistan have haunted me, but the cascading light shields me from the darkness of my soul. I don't want to leave this place. Beyond these walls, voices rage in a world unknown to me. I can't believe I'll be out of the Air Force in two months. I know it's time, but everything just spins.

The pastor announces: "Please stand with me for a moment of silence."

Behind the pastor, Ben's face appears still on the projected screen. He wears service dress blues with a large ribbon rack. His face is serious, with his eyes locked at attention.

I can't believe he's dead.

November 8, 2016 Shani Miller

A hundred questions rush through my mind. What tormented him? Was he working with drones or part of the kill chain? Were he and his wife struggling? Did nightmares haunt him?

I've been out of contact with Ben for a couple of years now, but we all went to Air Force tech school together. Ben was one of the sharpest analysts in our class, and humble too. Strait-laced, he was someone I deeply trusted. Him, Katie, Kim, and I used to carpool to church on Sunday mornings, and we'd spend late nights in windowless buildings studying together.

In the front row of the chapel sits Ben's wife, Katie. She holds a small baby to her chest, and a tiny toddler grabs her leg. Ben's face on the screen glares back. *What happened?* My chest trembles, and tears pour out of my eyes. *He's dead. Their daddy is dead.* I should have called him. Maybe I could have helped. I had my own struggles. I could have told him he wasn't alone. *Dammit, what happened?*

The pastor says words about Ben. His voice is soothing, and I know his words are true. Ben was one of the kindest souls I knew. Even with all the many unknowns surrounding Ben's suicide, he served our country with honor. Suicide could have hit any of us.

The afternoon sun cascades through the blue, pink, purple, and gold panels, and a gentle melody plays on the piano. I don't want to leave this place. Nothing makes sense outside of these walls. The bloody battle of Mosul rages. My own nation feels torn apart. Phrases like Black Lives Matter, Christian Nationalism, and MAGA buzz like a foreign language, and private email servers and great big walls are the chatter of conversations. Where do I fit into all of this? What the hell happened to my nation when I was gone?

November 8, 2016 Shani Miller

“At this time, I’d like to invite friends and family to share words about Ben,” the pastor says.

Ben’s brother comes to the mic. He glances at a wrinkled page of notes, then speaks directly to us.

“We always had a good time fishin’ and huntin’. I’m sure gonna miss him.” He tells us one story after the other, making us laugh and cry. In the front row, Ben’s mom’s flushes from crying. Ben’s dad wraps his arm around her holding her closely. *A mother shouldn’t have to lose her son.* He was too young. A soldier who hung himself in Iraq comes to mind, and I wonder how his mother received the news. Then I remember Brandon’s MC-12 crash in Afghanistan, and my heart breaks for his mom.

Ben’s brother makes his final comments, choking up with his last words. “He was a man of integrity, and a man of courage.”

The chaplain thanks all the friends and family for sharing, then pauses.

“At this time, please rise for the presentation of the colors.”

I rise to the position of attention with eyes locked forward. With my arms pinned to my side and my feet at forty-five degrees, I hear the color guard quietly giving commands. Both pride and pain run through my veins. *This is my nation. Ben died for my nation.*

“Color Guard, forward march.”

I snap my feet to face the American flag.

Ben, Brandon, and the soldier from Iraq flash through my mind. *It was all worth it, right?*

November 8, 2016 Shani Miller

At the first bugle note of the national anthem, I salute the flag. My eyes still locked ahead, red, white, and blue blurred through my tears. Outside these walls, both friends and politicians slander one another, and accusations fly like incoming mortars. Yet, nothing can take my pride away from this flag.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please stay standing for the gun-salute in honor of Benjamin Hynie.”

The first shots reverberate through my bones. I’m reminded that I’m standing on American soil. The battle of Mosul still rages in Iraq, but I’m here in this chapel.

Ben, Brandon, and the soldier’s deaths all at once. So much bloodshed. Their mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons will never see them again.

I’ve poured my life out for this nation and given it all. *Is it worth it?* Clamoring voices rage outside these walls. Blood is shed for freedom, but deception and self-glorification rule in our leaders. Ben, Brandon, and the soldier are gone, and war still rages on. A battle still storms inside, and Afghanistan and Iraq will always roar. I glance again at the stained-glass windows and find rest in the unknown. The creaky pews remind me I’m home, even if I’m wandering in my own nation.