

Everything has to go, no matter how great the cost. People only seem to notice this if it affects them, and only then do they see this horrible truth. I fear I am being exposed to this truth now. You have always been there for me, regardless of the situation. You are a gift from God. And now we are breaking.

Presently, you stand in front of me, dressed in olive-drab wool from head to toe. The image of you standing here on the dirt road to our tiny house looks stunning. You are, without a doubt, the living definition of perfection. But it reminds me that you will soon turn around and leave. You will no longer walk with me, but with a thousand identical men who match you in both appearance and in step. I want to remember this moment before you depart and at the same time, I can't bear to look at you. Before you go, you take me into your embrace one last time. Your touch, soothing, your words, tranquilizing. You've always had a way to draw me in so close that I can never back out, and I never *want* to back out. Then you're silent. You're done speaking and you just hold me in your arms. I don't want this moment to end. I don't want to be the first to let go.

But you must go. The time has finally come and you can't keep pushing past it. You begin to pull away from me, though I try desperately to keep my grip, on you, on my life, on everything. You begin to turn away, then you stop. You face me once more, and you say it. Those precious, dangerous words that any wife wants to hear. They fill me with relief; you will fight. They fill me with fear; words don't last. But I smile back, showing I am grateful. I don't want your last memory of me to be one filled with sadness, sorrow, and regret. You answer my appreciation with a look of determination, showing you meant every word you said. With that, you turn around, placing one foot after the other on the road to anger, blood, and violence. You're truly leaving me. And I can't stop you.

I will never forget that look on your face when I stood outside the door, dressed in what was going to become my regular attire for an unknown period of time. Your look was a hybrid of emotions that no man should ever have to see in a loved one: stress, sorrow, pride, regret, disbelief, everything, tangled into one. I know you were trying your best to be strong for me, as I am for you. I never wanted to leave you. It wasn't my choice. There was no way out for me, so all I could do was go in. I hope you know that. I would never leave you so willingly. As I turned to leave, I realized it

was the most difficult task I've ever done. Leaving you behind makes winning a war look effortless. I desperately wanted to come running back to you. But I couldn't. It just wasn't allowed. Especially not in a situation like this one.

Now I'm among a thousand men who suffer the same curse as I. Days are long. Callous commanders call our names at the crack of dawn, expecting us to assemble NOW! Impatient leaders and the early mornings greet us with packages of what is supposed to be an appealing breakfast. It's not. Demanding instructors push us through vigorous routines for hours on end, telling us to "Roll up our flaps and WORK!" Nights are even longer. Soreness from training, groans from homesick (or just plain sick) men, and rustling from sheets is not a good lullaby to listen to all night. It takes hours to feel at ease, and many more to fall asleep. It seems when I finally let exhaustion overcome my senses, I wake minutes later to find another arduous day is upon us. I never find myself in the mood to start it.

Home is not like this. You are not like this. There, I am awakened by your voice, not these stupidly annoying whistles. I worry that I'll forget what that life was like. I decide that I won't. I can't. I must hold on to all of those memories, or I will lose my drive to fight anymore.

The entire house is desolate, lacking your presence. Your departure led to a world of chaos that overwhelms me to the point that I feel I can no longer control my mind. Though I know that it's never true for a soldier, I imagine that you are safe. I must believe you're safe. I must. I finally convince myself that you are, but it would be nice for you to tell me that yourself.

I haven't heard from you since you left, though I haven't expected to. Yet. Still, I long hear your words that I not long ago took for granted. Big mistake. Your words I used to hear so often are now more valuable than a gold mine. Perfection. Priceless. Gone. I never realized their full value until they were out of my reach. And I regret not realizing it sooner.

The situation here is only getting more serious. Training is intensifying, more missions are being issued, more men are dying, more shots are being fired. I have been excelling in the training. Many eyes have settled on me, examining my every move, determining whether or not I am a worthy

fighter. It's almost a relief to know I am at the top of the pack. Almost a relief to know that other, higher soldiers even consider me.

Note that I said almost.

I only know that this attention will lead me to a field of blood and death. Earlier, I thought of possibly acting weak in an effort to be ignored so I wouldn't have a chance to fight. But when I saw what happened to the inexperienced, weaker men, my opinion changed. Though I am one of the best recruits in my division, I'm still deciding if this is truly for the better. But no matter. What happens to me now is out of my hands.

I don't think you'd like to hear that I have been sent into combat on more than three occasions already, my next deployment less than two weeks from today. I'm not sure how long my commander expects me to last. He often pulls me aside during training and advises me to expect the worst in battle. It seems he is hinting to expect death, which is *such* a nice thought. Though I want to tell you that I've survived numerous fights, and that I've risen to a high standard because of that, I know it's never a joy to hear of one who is constantly in a fight to the death. But there is so much more to tell you about military life. I must write to you about this. I must write to you. Period. I have longed to do so ever since I left, and I have no excuse for not writing. I must write to you. Immediately.

I am filled with remorse knowing I've not been in contact with you since my departure. For the past month, I have wanted nothing more than to address you. To let you know that I am alright. But I haven't! What an improper sign of affection. I seriously hope that you don't take offense to that. But I have no time to waste, so I will begin my correspondence:

*To the love of my life,*

No, no. That won't do. Too cliché. I crumple up my first draft in disapproval. I must make this perfect, for I know not when I may write again. I have to think. This shouldn't be that difficult. What would a wife want to hear from a husband...? Seeing that I'm not a wife, and most certainly never will be, I unfortunately can't relate. Focus... I pick up my pen and I try again.

*To my dear wife,*

That's worse than the first one! Again, I toss my attempt in disgust. Why is it now that I can't present to you a proper greeting? And then it hits me! If you loved the way I would speak to you before, why would it be any different now? Why not simply address you the way I always did? I find my pen and paper and begin again:

*My beloved Katherine Mae,*

Voilà! Oh, how the words run from my mind to the paper. How the words float off the page when I read them back again and again. Oh, this is the perfection I seek...

Ah! I must focus! I am here to write a letter to you, not think of one, become mesmerized over the beauty of it, and then forget the words a minute later. I ground myself once more, chastising myself in the process. Alright. The first line is complete. What shall I tell you? No. Don't think about it. Thoughts get in the way of everything. I continue, place my writing utensil back in my hand and onto the paper, letting the pen do the work.

Alas, I am finished. Hallelujah! I thought I'd never finish the letter. Not at that pace. But nevertheless, 'tis done. I am overjoyed knowing my words will reach you at last. I desperately hope that you accept my message with happiness and relief, not anger for believing that I've forgotten you. I never could even if I tried.

Never in my life did I ever expect to be filled with such joy by the sight of something as pathetic as a messenger boy. I see one coming up the road to our home holding...a note! It must be from you! Oh, how I have awaited this moment! I run outside to greet the young boy, but most to take the letter out of his hands, rip it open, and soak up the last of its contents. And that's exactly what I do.

Your words captivate me as I read, no surprise:

*My beloved Katherine Mae,*

I can think of no better way to start a letter. So many people try too hard to impress their intended audience and it comes out wrong. You made me feel like you are by my side as I read. I

continue, reading every sentence, every word, two or three times over to relive the joy of hearing them in my head. I must learn to value these moments while they last. Reading your letter takes much of my afternoon, but I couldn't care less. It is more than worth it.

I must reply! You must know that I had the privilege of reading your letter. Especially in this situation, correspondence is a rarity and it cannot be taken lightly. And it would be no way to repay you by giving you nothing. I sit down in your chair. I take out my pen. And I begin:

*My dearest James,*

Hmm... That won't do. It just doesn't sound right. Then what would work on a letter? I try to think. Think simple... Ordinary... And I have it! I recite the words and then I edit my opening:

*Dear James,*

Beautiful... Now what shall I write of? What would you want to hear? How shall I phrase everything? How would you like to hear it all come out? Why is writing something so simple so difficult now? Katherine, think! Think... No. Stop! I mustn't think too much. Thoughts will only get in my way. So I don't think. Instead, I allow emotion to take over, and transform my feelings into ink on parchment.

Thank goodness, my letter is complete! It might as well be a novel for its length. I do hope you get the chance to read it through. I want you to know that I have not forgotten about you during your absence. I never could even if I tried.

The war goes on, no matter how many men die in response. A war is an unsatisfied client, demanding more, draining the clerk of his resources until there is nothing left to take. It is a merciless disaster that can neither be stopped, nor controlled. Only inflamed.

Nearly two weeks have passed since I wrote to you, and I am sure that my letter must have reached you by now. I wish I could go back to those moments I scripted my letter to you, because I now stand in the living, or dying, definition of a blood bath. It's the most revolting event I have ever experienced. But I must act. I must help defend our men, for our enemy is advancing. Less than an

hour ago, most of my rank was taken captive. Some of our best included. I must find them. Before it is too late.

My feet are sore, I'm drenched in sweat, and I've made next to no progress in the last 30 minutes. I've walked swampland, dry land, flatland, hills, and am now moving into tall grass. I had hopes of success before covering every square inch of the battle front. But wait! I hear – a cry for help? It's too familiar. There it is again! I'm not mistaken! It's the leader of my rank! I have to go help him. I run, faster than I ever have. The grass is soon joined by trees, enough to increase my chances of running into one by 90%. But I keep running, all the way to a small clearing. And I see them.

Bleeding, blindfolded, and bound to a tree, my companions. I look for my leader, sweeping my eyes from man to man. And there he is. Through the mask of blood and anger, I know my instincts are right. His eyes lock with mine. We stare for a fraction of a second before he gives me that unmistakable look that we now know as pure shock. I must help him, all of them, get out. But how?

I scan the area: no guards, no guns, looks promising. I hurry towards the captives, ripping my knife out of my pocket, readying it to break the bonds. I've no time to waste. I hack at the ropes that restrain them, which are tied very strategically. I curse under my breathe, but I hack at the ropes again. Then I pull at them with all my might. Then, I hear a rustle behind me. And another. Uh-oh. The enemies are coming back to for their recent prize. I've come so far. So close. I can't let my rank down. Not now.

Then I hear it again, and this time, it is accompanied with the "click" of a loaded weapon. Have to hurry! I hack at the bonds one more time and give it one more yank. The ropes break loose from the men and fall to the ground. We're all tired and we all have our fair share of injury, but we can't stop yet. We are no longer protected by stealth, which is unfortunate. Despite their capture, the newly-freed soldiers jump to their feet, weapons in hand, and sprint away from the sounds of danger. I follow their lead, barely having time to process what's happening. I'm just reaching the trees when –

BANG! Strong pain surges through me, but I keep going. Have to – BANG! More pain. Too much pain. I stumble and fall in the soft grass, drained. I look up at the trees, dazed. I see the

grass is caked in red. Blood really is a strange color... Now I know I won't be getting up. I see my colleagues, good as dead. Our rank was never meant to succeed, only distract the enemy. I have known this for a while now, but never accepted the facts. I wasn't meant to survive this war. I was a pawn. I was meant to help our forces acquire what they needed to eventually pull off an even bigger stunt. I have done so. As I slip away, I begin to believe I did everything I had to...

But I didn't. I didn't return. Wasn't that my greatest commitment? Weren't *you* my greatest commitment? I promised you. I uttered those dangerous words, and I meant them. I promised. I *promised*. I've never lied to you; this is my worst one yet. Those words are my biggest regret. I begin to slide into the darkness of a world in which I will never wake. I wish I could see you again. One more glance, one more word, one more embrace. But I never will. *We* never will. Katherine, I'm so sorry.

Here he comes! I run out to him. Another letter from you! I meet him at the front of our yard, thanking him for his delivery. I tear it open – Western Union? I don't understand. I am suddenly filled with fear and panic. With shaking hands, I fumble through the note. My grip is so tight, my knuckles are turning white. I am surprised to see that I have not yet ripped the letter. I read:

The Secretary of War...

Uh-oh.

...desires me...

No. Please. Don't...

...to express his deep regret...

With that, I break. I don't need to carry on reading. I already know what the rest of the telegram says. And I am not brave enough to bear the rest of its message. You would never approve of such cowardice. I don't care. You are gone. And I can't help you.

Everything has to go, no matter how great the cost. People only seem to notice this if it affects them, and only then do they see this horrible truth. I've been affected. I've seen the truth. And the truth is that anything created is bound to fail. 'Tis the uncontrollable fault in our stars. A vase is bound to fall and break. A machine is bound to grind to a halt. Soldiers are bound to perish. Assurances are bound to shatter. Porcelain and pieces. Device and deteriorate. Warrior and wounded. Correspondence and contrition. You were always there for me, regardless of the situation. You were a gift from God. And now we are broken.