

The War Inside

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(Editor's note: The following are excerpts from a longer series of flash fictions about life as a soldier.)

Justice Is Blind

The sun rises on a clear blue day over the blackened, ruined city. Smoke and debris cover apartment blocks, while gunfire rings throughout streets littered with bodies and craters. A man accompanied by a group of soldiers gathers in front of a ruined courthouse. The soldiers shove the man against a damaged statue of Lady Justice. He is about to be executed by a firing squad. The soldiers line up, rifles ready, as an officer arrives. The officer quickly surveys the scene and begins to speak.

"Alright, let's make this quick and get out of here." The officer clears his throat. "I find you guilty of desertion from the military and treason against the state. Under the authority granted to me, I sentence you to death. Any last words?"

"Not really," replies the man. "All I've done are my duties to my country and fellow comrades. Yet the powers that be have condemned me to this path, and I am but a single man, powerless."

The man lifts his head up. "Therefore, I accept this outcome and am ready to face death. I hope others can live with my fate." He stares at the officer with cold blank eyes.

"Very well," the officer solemnly remarks. "Men, ready your rifles." The soldiers aim their rifles with pained expressions, hands trembling. The sound of a single shot pierces the streets as the man's head drops, his face unchanged. The ground begins to shake as other sounds of battle come closer. The officer orders everyone to move out. The body is left there as the soldiers move on.

A Soldier's Dice

I was in the mess hall drinking coffee at noon, with other soldiers milling about. I saw my fellow officer and friend walk in. His uniform was disheveled and improperly worn as usual, whereas mine was ironed with patches up to regulation. Standards are relaxed in a combat zone, however, and I stood out like a butler in a coal mine. He grabbed a tray of food and sat down at my table.

"Woke up late again, huh?" I remarked. "You're setting a bad example you know."

"Whatever, I'm not on duty until 1300 hours anyways," he replied. "Speaking of which, neither are you. Yet by the looks of it, you've been up before the sun rose. You're extra."

I shrugged as I sipped my coffee. My friend technically follows orders, while I do more than what's required. I wonder how we became friends, given the differences between us.

“I see you are having your platoon do drills again. Do you ever give them R&R?” I asked.

“Nope,” he quipped. “And your platoon looks like a bunch of misfits running around doing whatever they want.”

“My platoon is one of the most effective in the company. I look after my people.”

“It’s the soldier’s job to look after themselves. Our job is to follow orders and give orders.”

“You know there’s more to life than just following orders. We can make a difference.”

“No we can’t. All we can do is just look after ourselves. Life will chew us up and spit us out if given the chance. There’s no meaning in what we do. You of all people should know that.”

“I know, there are things that happen to us that are out of our control. But this logic works both ways. We can do whatever we want.” I smiled. “And so I’m going to be extra.”

In the following weeks the fighting got heavier and we both got injured. My friend was sent home due to his lackluster performance. I, however, was given time to recover and redeployed to an area with the heaviest casualties. We were both right, things didn’t matter. My life was out of my hands.

Rock, Paper, Scissors, Says...

There is a massacre about to happen. A group of unarmed people are lying in a ditch face down. A soldier has a rifle pointed at them with other soldiers cheering him on. The setting sun is casting dark shadows over the people. I see no other witnesses in any direction. A war crime is about to happen, I need to do something, this is the moment. Time slows to a crawl, my mind is racing everywhere. What can I do, what should I do, what will I do?

The soldier has his uniform unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled up. He has eyes of a scared predator backed into a corner. I should stop the soldier, killing civilians is wrong. But to go against my fellow comrades, they would know I went against them. I don’t know what to do but there’s no time to sit around and gather more information. Even if there was it’ll only complicate the problem, not solve it.

The trigger is about to be pulled. The people are covered in dirt and blood. Some of them are wearing T-shirts and jeans. Others are wearing jackets and dresses. I wonder if they are the neighbors of the soldiers we are fighting. They remind me of my neighbors back home. I wonder how our neighbors would react if they could see us now.

Damn, I’m overthinking again. The default option is to do nothing, wait till the situation blows over. This is not that kind of situation, I need to act now! But each choice leads to unknown consequences. I want to do what’s right, make the best decision.

No. That’s wrong. I don’t think like that. I don’t do what’s right, only what other people want. No one can fault me for that. Nor can they fault me for doing nothing. Doing nothing means no action, no responsibility, no blame. But here, doing nothing is a decision. I need to do something.

All eyes on me. I need to stand up for myself. What do I want to do? That’s the real question. That’s the person I answer to at the end of the day. I. Me. Myself.

Forget logic, there none here to use, listen to my heart. Forget what others think, who do I want to be? The answer is becoming clearer. I know what to do. I aim my rifle, with the sun behind me, determination in my eyes.

Mind Vs. Body

The war had been over for some time now. At least, signs of war were no longer present in the city. But the veteran still patrolled the battlefield in his mind. Each place a potential to be attacked, each moment a possibility of death. The veteran knew he was home; the warzone had not included coffee shops or bus rides. But that didn't stop his quick heartbeat, heavy breathing, gut wrenching. No matter what he told himself, that he was safe or that he was home, his body refused to listen. He and his body were trapped in the battlefield.

The veteran sought help from various sources. His family and friends told him it was all in his head. He already knew that fact, but understood that they were trying to help. They told the veteran that they were always there if he needed anything. He understood that, but knew he would never take them up on it. He was a monster stuck on the battlefield, one that shouldn't bother the peace of people back home.

At some point, the veteran decided to seek therapy. It may have been humiliating, but he figured he couldn't keep living like this. Something needed to change. He went to every therapy appointment and began to understand why he was stuck, but he was still trapped in the battlefield with his body.

It was suggested to the veteran that he should start writing about the battlefield, or take up writing in general. He wondered how that would help, since he was already talking about it in therapy and with his family and friends. Still, he knew his body was still trapped, and with nothing to lose, he gave it a shot. As he began to write, he noticed ideas and implications in his writing he never thought of before. His body was talking, with the pen as the body's voice. As the veteran wrote more, he was beginning to understand the traps the body was in. Soon he was able to bury the trap from the past and free himself. He was able to free his body and himself from the battlefield and move on.