

“I may often be the protagonist in my work, but I’m not always the hero. In this excerpt from my upcoming memoir, I explore the impact that war had on my integrity.”

SOMEONE ELSE’S HUSBAND

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Iraq was still several weeks away when I met Jared. He was charming and handsome. And married. We became friends around the time I started dying in my dreams. I’d wake from a roadside bomb explosion, or a close-range gunshot to my temple, only to realize the deployment hadn’t started yet. Flat photos of family and friends taped to my wall brought little comfort. The blue of Jared’s eyes always did, especially when he laughed. That was reason enough to sneak into his all-male barracks whenever possible.

Jared’s room had a connected suite, and came with two built-in chaperones, Jack and Ben. Suite made the pre-World War II rooms sound more luxurious than they were. The barracks were sturdy, but dingy. We gathered in the main room where the boys had twin beds on opposite walls, with a couch in between. Jack was short, thin, and shy. Ben was tall, strong, and goofy.

Jared was lumped into our single soldier category only by technicality. Had his wife joined him in Germany, he would have lived off-post in Army housing set aside for families. But she had chosen to stay in the States. She hadn’t seen the point in dismantling her life there, only to sit alone in Germany once Jared was sent to Iraq for a year. If she had been by his side during those final weeks before war, instead of me, well, who knows?

Life definitely would have been simpler if I’d been attracted to Jack or Ben. These were quintessential all-American boys from states like Arizona and Wisconsin. Each one of them told stories about their lives back home that made my heart burn with jealousy. They were some of the rare soldiers I knew that came from loving backgrounds. We bonded quickly over Adam Sandler movie quotes and bottles of beer.

American culture had us trained long before the military about gender roles, and what “good” men and women did. And as the Army marketed us as “One,” most infantry jobs were still exclusively male. Jared, Ben, and Jack were “Tankers,” or “19 Kilos,” and often went several days without seeing a woman. Whereas I was

“Chemical,” a “74 Delta,” and worked alongside men and women. They operated tanks, I taught chemical warfare protection, but afterhours, we were all the same— young and silly. Except I was alone in my desire to feel girly after wearing baggy camo uniforms all day.

I nurtured the Tankers to soothe my stifled femininity. That started with dating advice for Jack and Ben, tips on what to wear, and Haribo candy. Then eventually, back rubs for all three of them. On nights when we’d go out in Downtown Schweinfurt for beers and food, I loved getting dolled up for them. They not only noticed when I wore different perfume, or had my hair down, they spotted creeps from a mile away. I was a protector by profession, just like them. And still I craved their protection.

But they could only do so much. My stomach always clenched when I left my Tankers to face the aloneness of my room. There was a strange cruelty in barracks life—I was surrounded by fellow soldiers, but so disconnected. Each room was spaced only a few feet apart. I could hear people laugh, talk, fuck, fight, and snore. I wondered if they could hear me, especially when the nightmares started. The girl I lived with usually stayed at her boyfriend’s across the hall. I was on my own when I screamed into the dark.

Most nights I lingered as long as possible with Jared, Ben, and Jack in their drab barracks room. I’d often show up in my pajamas—gray sweatpants and an old t-shirt, too exhausted for pretty. They were sweet to me no matter how I looked, and I loved them for that. I’d rotate between sitting on the couch with Jared, with Jack on his bed, or with Ben on his. Being close to them quieted the endless chatter in my mind.

I inhaled the smell of their soap, danced my hands along the back of their necks. Thoughts of how I’d die in a fiery crash downrange couldn’t compete with the sensation of freshly cut hair under my fingertips. Ben loved to tickle me once I was focused on whatever movie was playing. Quiet Jack took a bit longer to put his arm around me and nestle in, but once he did, his smile didn’t fade. The warmth we cultivated lingered more after every visit.

The four of us made up our own little family. We were a mini band of brothers, plus one sister. I tried to keep things innocent with Jared, like with Jack and Ben. But chemistry doesn’t concern itself with commitments. The other boys either didn’t notice what we had or didn’t care.

Jared and I had started out sitting upright on the couch. Once the touch barrier was broken with the other two, Jared lay in front of me and let me hold him. His loneliness was more palpable than Jack or Ben's. Or mine. The heat between us melted all of that away. I held him close and marveled at how fast my heartbeat pounded against his sculpted back.

A handful of times, Jared's wife called his cell phone as we cuddled. He'd jump up from the couch, go into his room, and shut the door. Jack or Ben, whichever one had the remote, knew to resume the movie. I'd lay there alone as a dull ache spread throughout my body. Unlike when fear gripped my gut, guilt was more subtle. I ignored the sensation, along with Jared's perky voice on the other side of the door.

The reality of our deployment loomed large and was more inescapable than any marriage. Our time together was limited. The divide between support and infantry soldiers would only deepen in Iraq. Deeper still was our awareness that not everyone would make it home. Maybe that's why Jack and Ben kept quiet when Jared and I started having sleepovers.

We had flirted in front of the boys more and more as the weeks went on. They must have known something was up. Perhaps before Jared and I did. But they never said anything to either of us, and that was fine with me. There wasn't much to say.

Besides the pictures in Jared's room, and her phone calls a few nights a week, his wife's presence grew more distant. She was in America, living a life like ones we'd had before the Army. She faced loneliness too, but she was safe. The Tankers and I faced combat.

Jared had a cold the first night I stayed over. We whispered in between his coughing fits about our lives back home. He had a picture right next to his bed from the wedding. Jared was in a tux and she in her gown. They were a shiny vision of bliss. "Look at you two," I said when he saw me smile at the framed picture. "So happy."

"Our wedding was so much fun," he said. "Feels like a long time ago already."

We fell asleep holding each other. And next to Jared, I was finally granted a reprieve from my death dreams.

That night marked a new line crossed in which Jack and Ben were separated from us by a closed door. We casually made sure the boys knew nothing had happened. As we shuffled out to the main room in the morning, we talked about our sleep quality. Jared said, "Tara did the sweetest thing last night. Every time I

coughed, she squeezed me tighter. Even in her sleep, she kept doing it. Like she knew I needed to be comforted.”

Jack and Ben laughed and said together, “Awwww.” I blushed and shook my head. Jared smiled at me and winked. I beamed, happy to be celebrated for my softness. In that moment, we eased into a gray area. The boys weren’t concerned that I’d stayed the night with Jared. Neither was I. Our little family was fine.

I slipped out of their barracks room and back to mine. For the first time in weeks, my stomach didn’t lurch when I was alone. I was warm inside, and calm, and could still smell Jared on my skin. But the sight of my unused bed and the pictures on the wall above gave me pause. My civilian life, and who I was, seemed less real the longer I was in Germany. Like Jared’s wife, my friends and family back home had morphed into a concept rather than a constant. Jared’s touch was visceral. And more immediate than war, at least for the few weeks that remained before we boarded planes.

I convinced myself that sleeping beside each other was all we would do. Snuggles were a kindness we could share without crossing into anything scandalous. Whatever bond Jared shared with his wife was stronger than our smoulder. I wanted to believe we were more than good soldiers. I needed to believe we were still good humans.

Jared and I lasted through a week’s worth of platonic slumber parties. We fell into a routine that still included Jack, Ben, and lots of laughter. Then we’d go into his room, close the door, and lay together bonding without the boys. In the dark, we shared secrets, fears, hopes, and stories that Jack and Ben weren’t privy to.

One night, Jared admitted to having a threesome with his wife and her best friend shortly after their wedding. He said, “I blame alcohol,” with an awkward laugh. There was an unspoken question in the air. Would I judge him? As much as I was stunned, I was also relieved. Our sleepovers paled in comparison.

“So, you both wanted that to happen?” I asked.

“We’d joked about it from time to time. Then one night, the three of us got to talking about how I’d never cum from a BJ.”

“Wait, are you serious?” I asked.

Jared laughed, “Yes! I know, it’s weird. But I haven’t. I really don’t think I can.”

I giggled and said, “You know that’s a surefire way to get a woman to go down on you. Especially if she’s a perfectionist!”

“Yeah, that’s how my wife’s friend was. And the three of us had spent a lot of time together. I guess we got comfortable.” He paused, and sat up in bed. The room was too dim to fully read his expression. He sounded different, unsure. “It’s not like we planned it. But like I said, alcohol. The girls decided it would be fun to work together to make me finish.”

My eyebrows shot up. “And?” I asked.

“They tried, but it didn’t work,” he said. “But that’s as far as it went.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was too busy imagining myself with Jared, and a much better outcome. His voice interrupted my fantasy. “Things have been different since then,” he admitted. “I don’t think she’s as close to that friend anymore.” I thought I heard regret in his voice. For a moment, what I’d envisioned seemed insensitive. Especially when Jared’s face turned towards the nightstand and their photo. Then he lay back down and pulled me close.

Our whispers about sex continued as Jared said, “I miss the release so much. I love being able to let go.” We laughed about masturbating, and how that only helped so much.

“No one loves me like me,” I said, with plenty of sarcasm.

Jared agreed. “Yeah, but orgasms feel so much better when you aren’t alone.”

His words lingered in the air, almost visible between us.

“That’s true,” I whispered. Then I slid my hand down beneath my sweats. Since his arms were around mine, Jared felt me move.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

I smiled and didn’t speak. My face burned, but he couldn’t see me blush in the dark. Then I felt one of his hands leave my waist.

I touched me, he touched him, and nothing counted since we didn’t touch each other. Our sexual loophole left us certain we’d outsmarted fire—we slept soundly in our bed of denial. The next morning, we joked around with Jack and Ben as though nothing had changed. But Jared and I knew that gray area had morphed into an orange ember.

I don’t remember our first kiss. I’m sure we were in Jared’s room, hidden from Jack, Ben, and the rest of the world. Masturbation was our gateway drug, but that first high left us far from satiated. More lines were easier to cross the next time. I kissed Jared’s neck while he touched himself, only to help him finish faster. He did the same for me. At some point, neck kisses turned into mouth kisses. Then his

hands and mouth found my chest. We built up to touching each other and surpassed touching ourselves.

I couldn't see their wedding picture in the dark. On some level, I was aware of Jared's wife smiling down. But the further we progressed in bed, the less I thought of her face framed a few inches away. By the time his hand slipped beneath my sweats she was gone. Jared and I had to be quiet, of course, because Jack and Ben were always on the other side of the door. I worried about losing them as friends, but not enough to stop being with Jared. The payoff was too good.

When our lips touched, I was blissfully present with only him. His eyes, his smile, his abs, his back, his smell—all became a portal to a new place within. Jared's touch replaced the last of my resolve with sheer boldness.

"I think it's time you had a proper blow job," I said to him one night. That story he'd told me about not being able to finish was still fresh in my mind.

"Tara, you don't have to. I swear I didn't say that so you would want to," he told me.

"I know. But you should still let me try," I said, and smiled up at him as I headed down. He protested half-heartedly, but neither of us believed him. When my mission was successfully completed, we both lay there and grinned while he caught his breath. Another line crossed, and we couldn't stop there.

Sex with Jared was about consumption; we engulfed one another, and nothing beyond us mattered. Especially my growing certainty that I'd die in Iraq. He gifted me with temporary deployment amnesia. That was better than any orgasm, but I had plenty of those, too. Jared was a blue flame, and the only restraint we showed was in our soundless climaxes. I bit a lot of pillows around him.

We kissed and collided with raw enthusiasm, like convicts enjoying one last dessert before execution. We were equal parts mindful, and out of our minds. But our choices meant little in light of what waited downrange. Jared and I only had a handful of nights together in which we crossed all the lines. Each morning after, we feigned innocence, and the boys, ignorance.

Within days, our schedules changed drastically. Deployment prep ramped up. We all worked longer hours, were under more scrutiny, and most nights I couldn't sneak into their barracks unnoticed. Our little safe zone had been infiltrated by the urgency of a much larger mission. And then my nightmares promptly returned.

On one of our last nights together, me and the Tankers exchanged gifts. I bought each of them a small pillow and soft cotton pillowcase in their favorite color. “These will help you feel cozy when I’m not around,” I said.

The boys surprised me with a cream-colored teddy bear. I hugged him to me, and said, “Thank you!”

Ben said, “He’s your Tanker bear.”

Jack added, “He’ll keep you safe over there.”

I blinked away tears and hugged all three of them. I said, “I’ll name him in honor of your MOS, 19 Kilo.” Then added with dramatic emphasis, “This. Is. ‘Kilo!’” and held him out. Jared sprayed Kilo with his cologne and winked at me.

The sweetness of our goodbye was dampened by too many unknowns. We were all headed to Iraq, but none of us knew exactly where. My stomach tightened as earnest promises were made to find one another. Heavier than the unknowns were all the truths we didn’t say. All four of us might not be together again, ever.

Once downrange, we were all stationed at different posts up and down the Iraqi Highway. The Tankers didn’t have each other, and I didn’t have them. I was cut off from my comfort supply. All I had was Kilo, who smelled less and less like Jared each day.

There was no time to reflect on my actions, or what my private behavior with Jared signified. Combat life demanded I stay present. Any twinges of guilt were suppressed by survival mode. My simplest option going forward was celibacy, but I wasn’t strong enough for that. Lust was the only drug I had access to in Iraq.

Sex with Jared had blurred the lines of my moral compass. Mortal danger fucking shattered the illusion that I was ever “good.” I descended into distraction whenever possible. And although I didn’t actively recruit a new lover, one found me all the same. Someone *else’s* husband.