

THOMAS SIMKO

The Long Goodbye

I have too many texts from dead people. Too many. The last text I ever got from Dominick was, “Thx!” He was thanking me for complimenting a tattoo design. It would be his last one, a grim reaper tattooed on his chest over his one good lung. Even to the last, he hid his fear. He remained optimistic to his friends and family, but I know he was scared. I use the phrase “good lung” with a wide berth. He had maybe 20% use out of it. Because of the lack of oxygen, he dipped in and out of sleep. He couldn’t play games. He couldn’t really watch long movies or movies he hadn’t seen. Conversations were sometimes difficult. Those last months. I find it difficult to talk about them.

Every breath for him was a battlefield that took him back to Iraq. He was a bad soldier, and I mean that. Sonofabitch flipped a humvee once. A humvee. How the hell do you flip a ten foot wide, three ton hunk of reinforced metal? One time another private stole from his foot locker. Dom thumbed him right in the eye, blinding him. The private got a discharge. Dom got the shit details. That’s what they did to bad soldiers in his unit. They were sent into the worst places they could be. It was the burn pits that did it to him. Those fucking Iraqis, they’d burn anything. Garbage, plastics, dead animals. Uranium. Fucking uranium. Every time the air from those pits filled him up, particles of burning uranium seared and cauterized holes in his lungs. The holes, over time, would expand. The holes, over time, would kill him.

He limped on his cane from the kitchen to the bed they made for him on the downstairs couch. He had a hard time getting up and down the stairs to use the toilet, stopping to take breaks to breathe every few steps. Everywhere he went in

the house a bundle of wires and tubes trailed him, leading from his mask to massive tanks of air, an oxygen content so high, Dom said that if I had inhaled from his mask, I'd be dead before they could call an ambulance. They were a constant companion, a constant reminder. I remember being afraid to step on them, worried that I might cut off his air supply. Even though I knew, at least intellectually, that I was being ridiculous, the fear controlled me.

I'd sit there and talk to him. Listen really. He'd tell me about shows he was watching, things he bought with all the money the military was sending him for his "disability," his plans for the future. It all seemed so ridiculous. He was going to buy a house, get his license back (he'd lost it after crashing his car when the blackouts started). He was going to live, long and happy, once the doctors fixed him up. After he got turned down for a transplant, he still talked about those things, for a while. Even when he started on the morphine, he lied to us, told us it was no big deal like we didn't know it was the beginning of the death march. That's what they do you know. Doctors aren't allowed to assist in suicides, but they certainly are allowed to prescribe ever-increasing amounts of morphine.

The fear drove me away from him in the end. I couldn't be there for his last breaths. I couldn't be there for the last push of the morphine pump. I couldn't be there when his mother, along with mine, undressed him, washed him, shaved his face, and put him in his fatigues. I left a part of me there, on that couch where he died, and I don't want it. If I could, I'd send it to the president. I'd send it the sergeant who sent him to the pits for the first time. I'd send it to the recruiter, who promised him a good job away from an abusive father and a neglectful mother, who traded him his shitty life for a long, painful death. He was so brave to be so scared and still pretend for us. So he'd text me, the last picture he ever drew, a knowing reaper, and a thank you.

THOMAS SIMKO is an English professor at Misericordia University, an MFA student at Wilkes University, a writer, a musician, and an incredibly proud father. He has no previous publications. His current project is a novel, inspired by his daughter, to be used as his MFA thesis.