

Toy Soldier

by *Naná Howton*

James left his legs in Iraq. They were cut off just below his groin while the sun shone through the white tarp of the tent serving as a makeshift hospital. He was conscious when the saw cut through his flesh and bone and his blood drenched the sand under the medic's boots. He did pass out from the pain, before the anesthesia took effect and woke at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, in Germany. There, a steady flow of soldiers arrived daily, some in worse shape than he was. Morphine made it all seem like a marvelous blur of memories; he saw flashes of images, like his running shoes leaving indentations on supple green lawn, a soft breeze lifting the folded grass blades back to their original positions, erasing his imprinted steps as he went on.

Eventually James was discharged and flown back home. He arrived at Logan Airport on a cool December morning. A fat woman, whom after a moment he recognized as his wife, Mary, waited for him.

They drove home through leafless streets and crossed the Charles River, which reflected light gently, a change from the blinding reflection of the desert sun on the Humvee rearview mirror. Her convertible Ford Mustang, their only car, had been replaced by a utilitarian blue van, and he didn't have to ask her how she felt about it: Her driving was nervous, a succession of rapid accelerations followed by hard braking. Drivers honked at her now and then as she changed lanes, uncertain of what lay in her blind spot.

The first thing he noticed when they arrived home was the ramp attached to the kitchen door. It was an eyesore. The American flag flapped in the wind and there was mud where grass grew in the summer. A yellow ribbon had been tied to the mailbox by the curb. She wheeled him out of the van and the smell of fresh wood reminded him of saws and the whirl of their motors.

"When they took me in, after the explosion, they had to amputate me immediately," he said.

"We don't have to talk about this," she said.

"They could not wait for the anesthesia to take effect," he continued. "They had to cauterize me as soon as possible or I would have bled to death."

"That's gruesome and I don't want to hear it," she said and pushed him up the ramp.

The inside of his house had changed dramatically. The carpet had

been removed throughout and the exposed hardwood floor needed finishing.

"It's easier to roll on," Mary said in the living room.

"What happened to the china cabinet?"

"The social worker said you needed room to move around."

He had never liked the piece anyway. It was large and the double doors, made of curved glass, only produced in some cow town back in France. The moving company had insisted they needed to build a crate to move it or the insurance wouldn't cover any possible damage. It cost a small fortune to move it from California to Cambridge, but Mary, who already resented having to move east had put her foot down and insisted she wouldn't leave without it.

"The bathroom is outfitted for you too," she said.

He sensed a slight resentment in her voice. He wheeled himself to the bathroom. The room was much bigger now that the tub had been replaced by a shower, which had a tile seat for him, and bars on the wall. The stall had a slight slant so that water could run to the drain and still allow him to wheel in and out. There wasn't a showerhead, just a hand-held spray. The toilet was new, and higher to allow him to hop on from the wheelchair.

He went across the room, rolling easily on the tile floors and out the other door that led to their bedroom. The bathroom had been expanded at the expense of the bedroom.

He wheeled himself back to the kitchen where Mary roamed around, emptying the dishwasher.

"We need a little stepstool for you in the bathroom," he said.

She ignored him. They had often discussed how public places that had only one bathroom disregarded short people. She had said she was going to write a letter to the office of disability and complain that the business of replacing toilets to serve a handful of disabled customers didn't take into consideration that a great number of people were too short to use the new seats. He knew she had been only half-joking.

"I mean," he said, "it's already hard to be short and use one of them and with your weight now..."

She turned around to face him. "My weight," she said, "is not up for discussion."

He looked at the palms of his hands and saw that they were red from the little he had wheeled himself around. He felt tired.

"Can you take me to the garage?" he asked.

The space where her car used to be wasn't big enough to park the van, but empty it looked enormous. She had left the remainders of his school projects on the workbench and his fishing gear in the corner. He remembered

having caught a golden trout once on the Kern River, a species on its way to extinction in that corner of California. He remembered how it caught the afternoon light when it jumped as he reeled it in. He returned it to the river, feeling ashamed to have used the green glittery PowerBait to catch a fish that deserved a hand-made dry fly. He wondered if he would ever feel like fishing again and thought that in the end, one doesn't always get what one deserves. He saw that she had taken down the clear plastic containers with Christmas ornaments from the shelves and set them on the ground, probably planning to bring them into the house. During their first year in Cambridge they didn't have much money, so he made Christmas ornaments out of scraps in his lab at M.I.T. where he was working on his Ph.D. in material science. He realized that most of the things on the shelves were now out of his reach and the realization made his knees itch. He reached for them and found the empty legs of his pants. A sense of desperation overwhelmed him, and anger toward Mary. It had been her idea that he should join the reserves and get partial funding for school. He pushed the wheels forward and picked up one of his fishing poles. He almost started crying; his shoulders trembled. Mary must have noticed it because she took the fishing pole away from him, put it back against the wall and wheeled him out.

Two friends from M.I.T. stopped by in the afternoon. They, like Mary, did not want to talk about the war, and when James mentioned it, they patted his shoulder.

"Man, I am sorry you had to go through that. What a waste," said Matthew, the tall New Yorker whose research was in direct competition with James'. "I am glad you survived."

James wasn't sure how sorry Matthew really was, but what irritated him the most was the patting on his shoulder and how Charles, the guy he had just met before he was shipped out to Iraq, imitated Matthew's tone. They spoke in soft tones reserved for funeral parlors.

"I tell you, if you thought working on a thesis was grueling you ought to walk the sands of Iraq carrying your 60-plus pound gear," James said while Mary passed around water glasses.

"Well," said Matthew softly, "we all can't wait until you come back to the lab."

"And having to dodge bullets, too," said James.

"I have to show you this new composite material I am working on," said Charles. "I think I am onto something."

They changed the subject no matter how often James tried to stay on the Iraq track. Eventually they cut short their visit and left.

At night Mary helped James to bed and lay down beside him. There was a slight shift in the mattress and he almost rolled over onto her. He had to resist the gravity, holding onto the sheets until she settled on her side and the mattress was still. Her dark eyes looked sad and she touched his chest, running her fingers down the scar that went from below his breastbone to where his pubic hair started. There she let her hand rest for a moment, and he shivered, associating the reaction with the cool air in the room. She took it as encouragement and held his penis in her warm hand. The passivity of being on his back, half the man he used to be with a woman double his size, made him feel utterly out of control. A wave of panic rushed through his veins, like it did when he lay on the hot sand, after the explosion, losing blood, and unable to move, his left boot a few feet away holding what he recognized as his missing leg and the right leg nowhere to be seen.

He pushed her hand away and she turned her back to him. The mattress shifted and he rolled against her back. He kept his arms against his chest as if to protect himself against the enemy she had become. As he dozed off, he knew by her breathing that she lay awake.

The next morning they went out for brunch in Boston and he sat in front of his half-eaten bowl of oatmeal, wondering if the outing had been a good idea.

"It's a pretty day," Mary said. She was looking, not at him, but onto the sidewalk where people with their wool coats peered into windows.

She sounded chirpy, as if she had made a resolution overnight to cheer him up, to cheer herself up to the best of her abilities. Her thick black hair was loose around her shoulders and her eyebrows were set so far apart from each other that her forehead seemed to be the widest part of her face. He felt her trying to make an effort to reacquaint herself with the sullen fellow he had become.

"It feels good to be alive," she went on when he did not answer, but she was still avoiding his eyes.

The word "alive" made his legs hurt. It was an absurd feeling, to feel pain in limbs that no longer existed. Doctors in Germany had told him the feeling was common among people who lost limbs and that eventually it would go away. He yearned for the time when this bizarre sensation would be gone, when the itch on his feet would stop, when the pain in his shin would disappear. How could physical pain be real when the source of it no longer existed?

He resented Mary's cheerfulness, her attempts to lift his spirits by taking him out when all he wanted to do was to stay home. He thought of the

guys back there in the desert, who called him 'the engineer.' He had little in common with those career soldiers, he the educated reservist, but the sharing of perils and pre-made meals brought them together, and now they shared an intimacy they could no longer share with anyone else but themselves.

"Some of my friends are still back there in that godforsaken land helping people who don't want to be helped and when they do want help, it is something we can't give them, like a new home or a job in the Green Zone where it is safer."

"Why do we have to talk about this?" Mary asked. She shifted on her chair uncomfortably and looked away from him. "I can't get over how beautiful this day is for a December day!"

The scar on his chest itched as if he needed a reminder of the surreal thing his life had become. He surveyed the café; Mary was not the only chirpy one. People chatted and sipped lattes, poked at their eggs with their forks, smiled at each other. A baby banged his spoon on the arm of his high chair and when told to stop, grinned at his parents, exposing two small teeth in his lower jaw. A couple held hands across the table and it made him look at Mary's hand, busy with her fork, a strange hand he didn't recognize, couldn't place, couldn't remember having held.

Looking at people in the café, at their cheerfulness, anyone would think these were times of peace. He was a sour reminder that a war was going on, but nobody cared. He felt like a broken toy soldier tossed in the trash can.

"Were you in a car accident?"

He looked over at the girl. She was perhaps 5 or 6 years old and she had muffin crumbs on the front of her checked blue and green Sunday dress.

"A car accident, right?" the girl insisted.

Her mother touched her arm and reprimanded her. She looked at the purple heart on James' chest, mouthed an embarrassed sorry and went back to her conversation with her husband, who looked like a Harvard lawyer, clean-cut and wearing a fancy gray wool suit. He had fought so that these people could keep their way of life, their after-church Sunday brunches.

"We could go walk along the river to see the leaves," his wife said and then blushed.

Since she had picked him up at the airport, words like "walk," "run," "stand up" made her blush like when he had for the first time told her, "I want you," in the back of his father's Buick.

His memory of the girl in the Buick lingered with him. How she gave in to his advances, flushed and hungry and how afterward the skin of her cheekbones was dotted with red and sweat and she laughed as if he had been

tickling her, her hand over her mouth with coy delight.

For a moment he wanted to rescue Mary, as if the act would bring back the girl in the Buick. He wanted to smile at his wife and tell her what a good idea it was to go for a stroll under the birches and maples and the tall white oaks. But he looked at her and all he felt was scorn, as if she were a stranger who had killed the girl and taken her place.

She had hardly made eye contact with him since the airport, except when they were lying in bed for a brief moment. As she sat across from him she spoke casually looking over his shoulder, as if speaking to someone standing behind him. Why should he be the one who rescued her from the discomfort she obviously felt in the company of her crippled husband?

A man at a nearby table opened the *Boston Globe*. James saw him turn the pages, skip a story about Iraq and settle on the sports section.

When the waiter went by, Mary waved to get his attention and asked for more maple syrup. The extra syrup was just an excuse to get away from him for a while, he suspected. Though her pancakes had sucked up all the syrup she bathed them in, they still looked wet and brownish, with streams of amber liquid sipping out of the air pockets.

The waiter did not make eye contact with him either when he put the syrup on the table. Hardly anyone did. James did not resent them because he remembered looking the other way when the beggar at the corner of Hampshire and Columbia approached his car as he drove to work. The red light held him prisoner of the faceless hand with the cup; he had been glad when the man moved his business elsewhere.

He tried to think of pleasant things, and as he watched the waiter set two cups of hot chocolate on the table to his right, he remembered the fudge maker at the Baltimore Harbor throwing chocolate in the air as if it were ribbons; he remembered the smell of caramel and the crowd clapping for the performance.

"Aren't you finishing your oatmeal?" asked his wife, wiping her plate with the last piece of pancake.

"It disagrees with me," he said.

Food disagreed with him since the surgery, when he had lost a foot of his intestines and part of his stomach. She shook her head sympathetically.

"You can have it if you want," he said.

"No, I shouldn't," she said, not convincingly.

He pushed the bowl toward her and she dug in. Afterward she waved at the waiter for their check.

He took a deep breath and looked out again. Life went on under the

bright sunlight that had moved indoors, crawling over from the edge of the glass wall into the room, up the legs of tables and over their tops, reflecting from stainless-steel creamers. The clink of silverware on plates was soft and soothing in contrast to the cacophony of sounds in his memory, sounds of bullet volleys shattering glass, wood, bricks, flesh and bones. Particularly flesh and



bones; a sound he could not quite describe, that reverberated with a dull splat, like a shovel hitting a pile of sand.

Outside, she pushed his wheelchair across the Longfellow Bridge, past young people wearing M.I.T. sweatshirts running toward Boston. When they passed they made an arc around the wheelchair. They too did not look at him.

The wind lifted his bangs. His army crew cut had grown into a disorderly mess.

“I need a haircut,” he said.

“What?”

“I could use a haircut,” he shouted over the wind and traffic noise.

His wife had trouble pushing him. The wind coming from behind them brought her panting sounds to his ears and a mild sour smell of sweat to his nose. She stopped to catch her breath and they watched the Charles River move slowly, a silvery flow around the hull of boats covered with white tarps on the Cambridge side, retired for the season. It would be a while until spring, when the colorful kayaks and sailboats would navigate up and down stream again.

After a moment he said, “What a tableau we make: the cripple and the fat lady.”

The stroll over the bridge was improving his spirits as he always imagined water would have done in the desert. He wanted to talk about the land so far away now — how the pumps in the fields made him think of anteaters, constantly sticking their noses in the ground. He wanted to talk about how beautiful some women were, with their dark mysterious eyes full of promises that could have been of pleasure or death, and how ugly they were, when they happened to be ugly, with reptile skin and toothless dark mouths.

James looked along the banks, where the forest-green bearberry bushes poked from under the carpet of yellow foliage fallen from the trees, leaving dead-looking limbs pointed toward the blue sky like the dry leathery fingers of people in the desert.

On the other side of the bridge, they crossed the street into M.I.T.’s courtyard where the school dome, like the helmet of a World War I soldier, seemed to protect the brain of the institution was deserted.

“I used to play Frisbee here,” he said. “The materials science department is right on that corner of the Infinite Corridor.”

“I know where the department is,” she said.

James realized he kept thinking of her as someone else, the impostor who didn’t even look like his wife. She had been there often. He liked when

she showed up unannounced sometimes and the way his professor or his colleagues gawked at her. It made him proud to be her husband, such a pretty girl. On the grass, the wheelchair didn't roll as easily, so Mary pushed him to the paved path and wheeled him across Massachusetts Avenue to the student union.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

"I'll be right back, I'm thirsty."

From where he was he could see her paying for a bottle of water and a candy bar. She ate it in the store, chewing quickly. When she returned to him, the corners of her mouth were stained with chocolate.

She wheeled him back to Boston. Across the bridge they met John, his running buddy. It was an awkward moment as John stood there panting, catching his breath. He had met Mary only a couple of times and ignored her now, as if she had only been Jame's caretaker.

"I was planning to come pay you a visit," John said finally.

"I'm coming to the lab tomorrow," James announced.

"Great. That's just great!" said John and he patted James on the back.

James was furious. There was the patting again. People had never patted him on the back before, but now that he sat at their chest level they found it perfectly acceptable to do so. He glared at John and thought that if he had opted for the heavy duty electric chair, he would have rolled over his feet right there and then.

"Well," said John. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

And as he started to trot away, he turned around and waved, "say hello to Mary for me."

Mary flinched and her mouth opened as if to say something, but instead she struggled with the chair over the uneven sidewalk of the bridge.

James was grateful when they got to the car and he saw how flushed she was, how sweat had made dark stains under her armpits. But the feeling passed as quickly as it came; it wasn't his fault she was so fat. His wheelchair was extra-light, made of aluminum and carbon composite, the stuff of fishing poles, and he was barely 110 pounds these days.

He watched the beads of sweat on her face as she drove, and again he felt he should thank her for the effort, but didn't want to call attention to how much bigger she was now. He didn't know how to be grateful and tactful at once, so he stared out the window at the brick buildings crowding each other. At the street corners pedestrians waited to cross, carrying shopping bags. He saw a menorah in an apartment window and on the street level of the same

building a deli window was decorated with Christmas lights and a toy reindeer moved his head up and down toward a cheese platter as if it were a pasture.

The static of the radio surprised him; he blinked and looked at it. Her fat little hand gripped the dials, scanning stations. Her hand went back to the steering wheel when Christmas carols filled the car.

"Oh, please!" he said.

"Don't you want to get in the spirit of the season, honey?"

"I can't stand it," he said.

"It's such pretty music."

"It's too much. It feels obscene."

She turned the volume down, but left it on.

He wanted to turn it off, but he had not yet mastered how to scoot forward on his butt. He sat there feeling like a prisoner of Santa.

"I was thinking we should decorate our tree tomorrow."

"Which tree?"

"I'll get one," she said.

That used to be his job. He always got a small tree for them, about two feet tall, to put in their window, and they talked about how they would have a much bigger one when they had kids. The thought made him laugh now.

"What's so funny?"

"I was thinking, how in the world are we going to have kids now?"

"The same old way, honey."

"I don't have legs to prop myself between yours and if you sit on me, I'll be as flat as a slice of ham," he said laughing.

"That's not funny."

"It's hilarious!"

He was shaking with laughter. His belly hurt, but he couldn't stop himself.

"No more... no more!" he begged.

"I am not making you laugh," she said sourly, but she had the sense to change the subject. "Let's stop somewhere and get eggnog and cookies."

"Dear God," he said. He had spit on his chin and on the clipped empty leg of his pants. "You are so cheerful, aren't you?"

"It's good to remind ourselves things could be worse."

He gritted his teeth and wiped his nose with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Fine," he said, "I'll write Santa a letter and ask him for a pair of legs."

"Why are you so upset, honey?"

"Why? Why? You popping pop tart poriky. Can't you see why?" The

series of p's made him want to laugh and his last fit still made his belly hurt, so he stiffened his chest and tried to control the urge

"It's OK, honey."

The detachment with which she endured his insults took the edge away from his desire to laugh. Instead he was upset, so upset he had trouble breathing, so he rolled down the window and the chilly wind seemed to clear the inside of the van. Again he felt the legs that were not there in his furious desire to swing them because there was so much room between his bottom and the dashboard.

At a red light he observed a man on the sidewalk. He was about his age, mid-20s, wearing a sweater with the Red Sox logo on his chest, his face vibrant against the holiday lights. He lit a cigarette while he walked, peering inside the shops. James had a suffocating desire to strangle the man, but as the van moved and he caught the fresh air, he rolled the windows up again and felt his rage turning toward his wife. He held the rage in his belly, in the disguised, controlled way he had often used when confronting the public on the streets of Baghdad.

"Mary," he whispered.

"Yes, honey."

"Why do you suppose a man in my condition would have any reason to be cheerful?"

"You are alive, and the same can't be said of the Humvee driver."

"That's such a pile of crap," he said softly. "Such a pile of crap. Why is it that people love to compare misery? Like who suffered more. I lost one leg, you lost two. You lost two legs, he lost his life."

"To put things in perspective," she said.

"I don't care about that," he said. "I feel the way I feel despite whatever worse things have happened to others. I'm miserable, but I don't want to join a miserable men's club to feel better."

The car was stopped again and he watched people through the window of a Starbucks.

"Look at them, Mary. Look at them sipping their tall nonfat caffè latte with extra foam and a hint of cinnamon. You look at them and you think we are in Iraq on a freaking picnic. Look at them."

"At least they don't hate you like they hated Vietnam vets."

"I wish they did, Mary. As it is, I don't exist."

She nodded, but he wondered if she understood him or she just wanted to humor him. He stared at her profile as the car lurched forward. She had grown a triple chin and her dimple was gone, swallowed by the layers of

white skin with a soft hint of pink, like a skinless chicken breast. She grew fat with the country, detached, oblivious to what he was going through.

James watched her get out of the car and walk around it. Her figure in front of the van seemed enormous, her breasts jutting out in front of her. He waited for her to come around, holding the door handle, wary of this fate. He fought an impulse to lock the door when she paused at his window and remembered that she had to go all the way to the back of the van. He saw her go away, her figure filling the rearview mirror and then he heard the back door open and the ramp lowered. Soon he felt the forceful pull on the handles of his wheelchair and the dashboard receded from his view.

The air outside was biting cold and he missed the warmth of the van, but she slammed the doors and pushed him along the newly built ramp into the kitchen where the smell of burnt macaroni and cheese hung in the air. At dinner, the night before, he sat there staring at his plate of macaroni and cheese and seeing maggots, the maggots in the body of the teenage boy his squad had found in a Baghdad suburb.

He felt nauseated again as she parked him in the living room, in front of the TV set. She casually dropped the remote control on his lap and moved around trying to tidy the place, piling tabloids in a corner and picking up candy wrappers. He watched her bottom squeezed in her navy blue sweat pants and felt a mixture of disgust and desire for her ever-expanding ass. The desire surprised him so he searched for the roots of it and found nothing.

She took her trash to the kitchen and he heard the refrigerator door open. He put the remote in the pocket of his shirt and wheeled himself closer to the kitchen door, where he caught sight of her back while she stuck her hands in the fridge and brought things he couldn't see to her mouth, smacking her lips. His desire was growing. He blinked and saw her there, her face pressed against a shelf in the refrigerator, held by his powerful hands while he took her from behind, anchoring his legs firmly on his feet. His scar itched and his stump hurt.

She got the carton of orange juice and drank from it, throwing her head back, and he heard the gulps as the juice went down her esophagus. She put back the juice, and moved aside, which allowed him to see her next target. She took a jar of olives and stuck her hand in it. After she stuck a few in her mouth, her fat little fingers like night crawlers wiggled inside the jar trying to grab the last olive.

"Haven't you stuffed yourself enough?" he asked.

She turned to look at him, squeezing her eyes as if he were an apparition. She stopped chewing, but her mouth was still full. She swallowed slowly,

refusing to move her lips, refusing to let him see she had food in her mouth.

"I can see what you did all this time while I was risking my skin for the likes of you. You stayed indoors watching TV, reading tabloids and stuffing your face. Have you looked at yourself lately? You look like an elephant seal."

He was angry and he wanted to make sure he hurt her. An overwhelming feeling of power crawled up the legs he had in his memory, and he felt his stumps warm up.

"You are a swine, and you keep growing fatter, lazy and unaware."

The word "unaware" awakened something in him. He fought the erection coming.

She put the jar down on the counter and closed the refrigerator, all the while facing him as if afraid of turning her back to him.

"I moved here for you and that is what I get," she said.

"Oblivious, latté-drinking sow," he went on. As if he were a blow-up doll, he felt his groin engorging and air filling his chest, inflating his arms.

"I sold my car," she was growing angry too. "I sold furniture that had been in my family for four generations."

"Poor you!"

"Well, there is a miserable men's club. You aren't the only member, whether or not you care about it. You fucked me."

"I can't remember the last time I did it," he said.

"You fucked me up, you jerk," she said. "I changed my life for you and you can't even see it. It's all about you, your misery, your miserable state."

"I don't know who you are," he said. "You fooled me, you took over my wife's place. Who the fuck are you, fat lady singing in my kitchen?"

His fury flared and his desire to really hurt her surged. He closed his hands around the metal of his wheelchair and squeezed it hard. He wanted to have his hands around her neck and watch her choke, watch her tongue stick out of her mouth while she turned purple, while her eyes bulged out of their sockets. He wanted to settle a score.

He threw the remote control at her and it hit her in the face. A trickle of blood started on her eyelid. She touched it, saw the blood on her hand and looked more appalled than angry. She backed away when he moved forward, and he stopped to recover the breath his anger was stealing from him. He took in air, but not much, as if whatever feelings filled him were a physical manifestation that occupied spaces in his chest, in his arms, in his penis, leaving little room to breathe. He hurt all over; even his skin seemed to distend. Fueled by his rage, he summoned his strength and moved his chair toward her.

She opened the kitchen door, and he worked harder to get to her

before she ran out. But she wasn't fleeing. Instead she waited for him calmly and the power of her good legs only made his desire to take her larger than life. He craved her then and it infuriated him.

"I never wanted to move here, I hate the cold," she said. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. The smeared blood made her look like a crazy woman. "I hate that I can't reach the toilet, I hate that I had to leave my job to move here. You never cared about me, it was all about my looks. I hate the way you look at me like I disgust you."

"That's right, you disgust me!"

He got to her and she caught his chair. He wanted to tell her what a futile exercise it was to try to stop him, but she was fast. She clasped the chair and pushed it out onto the ramp with a force he never knew she had. The chair rolled quickly and the next thing he knew, he was on the ground, his face in the mud.

The cold made his cheeks hurt all the way to his gums. He tried to push himself up, but he couldn't. He lay there stunned, the cold air forcing tears that left frosty tracks on his muddy cheeks. From the corner of his eyes, he caught her figure, just a dark outline of a human form by the poorly lit kitchen door, the silhouette of her breasts heaving up and down.

"Don't come back," she warned him. "Don't come back until you feel grateful enough to thank me for wheeling your worthless crippled ass around."

"I am a soldier in the biggest, most powerful army in the world," he cautioned her. He wanted to warn her that his buddies would make her sorry, but the very idea made him giggle.

"I'm serious," she said. "Don't come back until then."

She slammed the door and he was left in the dark. The quiet of the winter afternoon seemed to welcome the evening too soon. He lay there, rubbing his finger on the crust of frost on the mud, his penis shriveling. Somewhere in the blurred field of his vision he caught the glow of televisions coming through the windows of the neighborhood.