

tapped



a short story by
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Tapped is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Author's Note:

Tapped was my entry in National Public Radio's Round Nine of their occasional feature, "Three Minute Fiction," in which they invited listeners to submit an original, unpublished story of 600 or fewer words which is "not inappropriate" and fulfills a condition set by that Round's author-judge. *Tapped* was submitted for consideration in Round Eight, concluded May 20, 2012. Each story had to incorporate this sentence: "She closed the book, placed it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door."

TAPPED



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She closed the book, placed it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door. There is no strategy around it, she mused. Only the way through.

Jack and I—that was different, she told herself. Like his old man, he was a teenaged conscript hooked into jungle warfare by bunraku politics beyond our comprehension. We were an item, graduating to reckless and fertile plans, when we hit that wall in 1968. For those three years, our lives—our parents and mine—orbited the cold reality he might not make it. I was lucky. Couple bullet holes and random tropical infections later, I got back a sober and determined adult. The defoliant, which ultimately took him two years ago, was our compensation. Between tuition assistance and eventual partial disability we finished school and nourished an exurban life—him in retail, me in teaching. Brandon came to us right before they took our embassy in Tehran, and had just married his college sweetheart when al Qaeda turned four civilian transports into air-to-surface missiles. Jack saw his unguided resolve and sat him down. Take control, he told him. Study it and shape it by making as many decisions for yourself as

you can—give it every chance to mean something to you later. So, they mapped it out together. Air Force officer school and the full path to the 23rd Special Operations Force out of Hurlburt Field. Integrated JSOC air intelligence—a calculated risk, but with deliberate, incentive-based training and decent career potential.

In the hallway, the assault on her senses of old, cherry-stained oak, assembled flora, and that vague odor of chemical morbidity nearly staggered Mary. She cleansed and centered herself with a deliberate breath.

She came abreast of the pew where they sat. Where was usually found Antoinette—our Nettie, bright, fresh, with endless possibility when she became family more than a decade ago—was a painted, blasted husk. Coming from a family where risk-reward calculations never entertained even a suggestion of mortality, she was a diffident partner, distracting herself with child-rearing, interior design, and the self-conscious congratulations from strangers that her husband's status earned her. That veneer of self-conscious patriotism and magnetic ribbons, designed by our self-gratifying culture to disguise the profanity of human sacrifice, exploded when Brandon's U28-A did. 'Continuing investigation;' whether it was an RPG or mechanical failure will figure only in what his wife and three kids are paid posthumously.

The older boys ceased fidgeting in and scratching at their alien finery when they saw her. "Nana!" Alistair cried, slipping his mother's negligent half-embrace to tumble into Mary's legs. Graham, a scant two years younger, leapt after him. Jonathan, the toddler, slept fitfully at his mother's other side. Mary bent toward their upturned faces.

“Give me your hands, boys. We’re going to say good-bye to your Daddy.”

They came alongside the satin, teak, and brass box that quartered Brandon’s body. Alistair tugged at her.

“I want to see.”

She lifted him. He took it in and rubbed his eyes, terrified and confused equally. She set him down and focused on him, her hand over his heart.

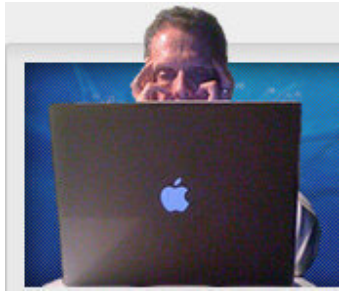
“That’s not your Daddy. Your Daddy is in here, always. Remember.”

Nettie was up, roused by a waking and fussy Jonathan. Mary marshaled his elders to their mother’s side and raised her arm to enfold her.

“Come, Nettie. We’re going to go down this path. Together. One foot in front of the other.”

‘Grief is a process,’ the book read. The convenient truths of shallow, “self-help” books be damned, Mary thought. It’s *war*.





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