

THE MUNDANE

NON-FICTION

Howard Carter

This morning is like many others. It is perfectly mundane. The small things are all things. I wake again to the smell of her soft curves, poignant and knowing. We are past the immediacy of marketed perfume, and into the warmth of real human aroma. We touch to face the day.

Our lives entangle, sometimes long, sometimes short, but never with the youthful anxiety of trying to prove sexual prowess anymore. Thoughts of when we were young, 'If we made love that way now, we would break ourselves, not the furniture.' The insecurity of youthful sex has been replaced by the intimacy of marriage. Lost in the moment...

Knock, knock, knock! "Mom, Dad, stop. Are you kissing again?"

"No son, go back to sleep," we reply in unison. His little feet scamper back into his room.

I roll out of bed and start the routine. The cool hardwood floor is pressing against my feet as I limp into the kitchen to make the coffee. "Could be a lot worse," I say to myself while thinking about the condition of my busted-up body.

I stop at my computer to write a few of these lines, then I walk back to my bed, only to find that my son and dogs have taken my place. The bed is now full of an intertwined blob of dog and human in the soft silence of gentle pure morning love.

'Ah well,' I think, as I head back to the kitchen for that cup of coffee, yielding my rightful place with her to the dogs and our 10-year-old son. 'It will be time to get up soon.'

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The family day begins with a little late start, as per standard. The bed-laden quiet of the house turns into a team sport-like tenor as we get our son off to school.

“Baby, I got his lunch, please pour him some cereal.” Ten minutes left in the game.

“Ok great, I’ll give him a ride this morning.” Nine minutes left in the game.

“Ok great, son, here is your homework folder.” Eight minutes left in the game.

“Come on Croft, put your shoes on.” Five minutes left in the game.

“Come on Croft! Are you on your iPad again?” One minute left in the game.

Buzzer: time to go.

My son cackles with the dogs and darts around the room as we head to the door. I throw on a coat and hat to cover my morning hair—now five minutes late. It is a quick seven-minute ride to and from school. I drop off my son and then return home for the morning routine.

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My wife walks up to me as I login to check email. Her, with her slatternly morning hair. Me, with my hat head. She gives me a kiss before brushing teeth—that familiarity of time.

I take time to notice the sight, sound, and smell of her peeing as I shave, knowing that I will write about this today. We share the dirty toothbrush.

Who cares? I mean really, after sixteen years, I doubt anyone would. Perhaps there are marriages that are not as intimately gross as ours—too bad for them.

We talk about the day, the triumphs and frustrations of graduate school, and her private psychotherapy practice. Then she reminds me of her overnight trip to Connecticut to train our dog Fancy on Sunday.

The dogs are her favorite vice. She sits up late at night drinking wine, blogging about dog training. “Two good dogs,” we have, and often say in unison, as we come through the front door. They sleep on the couches, crowd us in bed, beg at our table, bark at the mailman, cry when they want

something, and eat raw leftover bits from the butcher. These are the normal things in life.

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The day marches on as I write this. I stop and grab my wife at work to take her to Munro Auto. It costs five hundred dollars for new brakes on the Subaru. Not a problem. We live well within our means, and that is smart for a marriage. It is a habit we learned while I was in the Navy.

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Yes, my wife was a military spouse—we both hate the term, “Navy Wife.” The war is over for us now, but before I left the navy in 2012, it was all consuming. Now, when a frogman dies, sometimes I show my wife the news on this computer screen. She frowns with sadness in her eyes. The last death was reported on March 19th, 2015. A parachuting accident in Perris, California. I did not know the person who was killed this time. He was Jason Kortz, twenty-nine, an enlisted man with a master’s degree from the University of Denver. I have to update this, April 26th, because a teammate died drowning on Friday while I am editing this, with yet another in critical condition. He dies later.

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Back when we were in Virginia my wife went to one of the memorials while I was deployed. When the SEAL Teams have too many casualties for the Church on the Base in Virginia Beach, they move the memorials to the base theater. I have bad memories of both those places. The one constant in the chaos of the SEAL Teams is the endless parade of sudden youthful death. I only went to about 10 - 15 memorials over time, because I was deployed. I told my wife to avoid them.

The sight of the kids was the worst. The babies screeching in the arms of the widow. A young son breaking down with the realization that this was real, that dad was never coming home. A child’s small hand trembling, gripping our flag as he passes by. His blond hair quakes while he shakes and chokes. Tears streaming down his face from his little red stained eyes, eyes that are now forming black circles. Black circles from his presence on this earth since the time he got the news—news that dad was killed.

Sometimes you did not know the person. You may have worked with him a couple times. Sometimes, he was a close friend. All times, he was a brother in arms who went through the same hell you did, to be a frogman. Now his son walks before you shattered, reminding you of a nephew, and then later upon reflection, my son.

It can happen to you. During my time of service from 1990 - 2012, ninety-four of my teammates were killed in service to our nation. The most driven and capable young men I have ever met, who expired because of a gunshot, explosion, fall, or drowning. Many more have died since then. Some die in training, some in wars, some from suicide, and others from health problems that are a result of their exposure during the time in our military.

In the Teams, the budget is infinite. The time operating is finite. Over a billion dollars a year is spent on a community of about two thousand men. That creates an unmatched breakneck pace where you travel and operate globally using every medium—on and under the sea, air, and land. The only constant is constant transition. It seems cool when you are young and conditioned for it, but what it really means is that you run out of time before the government runs out of money. It means that when your career ends, the pace dies with it.

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I love my life, my wife, and the fat that comes with middle age. I cry sometimes, when I think of the friends we lost who will never get to see these days. My wife does not cry, because it was never me. She was home for the wars, which is in all ways harder than being there for them. I had the fortunate ability to react and know where I was and what I was doing every given moment in a very dangerous secretive job, which gave her the unfortunate circumstance of not knowing any of those things about her husband. Twelve years of our marriage were during my time in our navy. I was gone an average of 210 days a year. She stayed. That cannot be overstated.

I tell everyone that in the biggest lottery of life, I hit the numbers. It is true. My marriage is beautifully imperfect. Back when I was operating, I am quite sure that her being home for the mundane was not such a beautiful thing.

Since the time I started this essay in 2015, forty-nine Navy SEALs, Special Boat Operators, and support technicians have been killed while serving our country. When you read this, there will be more.