

BOOTS

Recently I met a quiet young woman who didn't say much but what she said was wry and pithy and direct, and after a while I asked if I could take notes as she talked, and she said okay, and this is most of what she said: My name is Jacqueline. You can call me Jackie. Until recently you could call me Lieutenant. I am now retired from the service. I will be twenty-seven years old on Sunday, at fourteen hundred hours. I have a dog named Gus. I live near the beach. I was a hematology nurse. I am in good health, considering. I drink tea. I learned to love tea in Kirkuk. Some days we had tea ten times a day. We found a samovar and learned how to use it. There was a man among us who could play that thing like a guitar. It got so we couldn't drink anything other than the tea he summoned from the samovar. It was the most remarkable tea. He vanished one day when his truck was hit by the bandits. Another man took his place. He vanished too. I took his place. After a while I forgot everyone's names. For a while I called people by their numbers but after a while I didn't call them anything. That's when I knew I had war sickness big time. I never got hit by fire but pretty much everyone I knew did. For a while there I thought it was me, that as soon as I said hello to someone or shook hands or learned their names they were doomed, so I stopped touching people and learning names. You would think wiggling out in the middle of the war would be bad but it's just normal. No one talks about what happens to the people nothing happens to, but something happens to them, and no one talks about it. Probably because we don't have any words for what happens. The fact is wars kill words, but no one talks about that. Wars kill everything except more wars. Wars never end, they just hibernate and mutate and come back stronger somewhere else. Wars are the zombies of history. Some of what wars kill off you see getting killed off, like kids and towns and schools and Saturdays. But some of it you don't, like the birds. The birds don't nest in wars, you know, so pretty soon there are no birds, and then where are you, without the birds? What kind of world is that, with no birds in it? You notice things getting killed off little by little and then after a while you stop noticing things altogether. You don't even notice yourself. You just get by. By the end all I cared about was my shoes. You want really good shoes in a war. Trust me on this one. I had the best boots you could ever imagine and I kept those suckers clean and oiled and ready for anything. When I got out of the war I kept wearing those boots for the longest time. I wore them with pajamas and with the bathrobe and with shorts in summer. It's only the last few weeks I go anywhere without those boots. Those are really good boots. When I am in those boots nothing can happen to me. Trust me on this one. I keep them on a special shelf at home, just in case. You want to know something real and true and honest and deep about wars? Boots. Good boots are the secret. Really good boots.

Brian Doyle