

---

# SHORT STORY NIGHT

---

FEATURED STORY:

## CHEESE by Reed Kuehn

**Virtual Interview with badger  
veteran and author!!!**

REED KUEHN is a combat veteran who grew up in Wisconsin. A graduate of Fairfield University's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, Kuehn was awarded first place in The Iowa Review's 2024 Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans.



READ THIS STORY AND JOIN NEENAH PUBLIC LIBRARY STAFF AT LION'S TAIL  
BREWING MONDAY, DECEMBER 8TH AT 7:00 PM FOR A ONE-HOUR DISCUSSION  
FEATURING TRIVIA, LAUGHS, AND OTHER SURPRISES.  
21 AND OLDER.



## *Cheese*

Three Manhattans in, breath and spittle sour from sweet vermouth, Uncle Luke had been flitting about, regaling us with a recent encounter he'd had with an albino squirrel. He was in a squat, feeding the imaginary animal.

"Albino. I'd never seen one before, pure white, gorgeous!"

My grandmother's head popped around the kitchen corner, her face tight and red.

"Luke," she said, her gravelly timbre stopping him cold. "Where is the cheese?"

I was standing close enough to see the precise moment sweat beaded on his forehead. He rose, and my grandmother leveled the palm-sized bowl of her two-foot spoon at his chest. On the other side of the room, my father's eyes went wide, his hand instinctively covering his backside.

"No cheese," she said, making as if to strafe the spoon across the room, bringing everyone into her sights, "no Thanksgiving."

She withdrew to the kitchen, and the room's attention turned first to my uncle, blinking and speechless like a startled baby, then to my grandfather, reclined in his leather chair beside the fireplace. A shadowbox of his World War II medals hung above him beside a framed picture of Chesty Puller, whose ubiquitous upside-down smile always made him appear bemused with some tragic life secret only he was privy to. My grandfather flashed a similar grin, then saluted the room with his cocktail.

Luke's shoulders slumped, his head listing. "I forgot, Dad. I'm sorry."

My granddad finished his drink. "You heard your mother."

Everyone had. To us grandchildren, she was warmth, charm, and a seemingly endless supply of baked treats, but my aunts and uncles attested in hushed voices and winces to an unbending disciplinarian. They knew a different side of that spoon.

"Nothing's going to be open. It's Thanksgiving," Luke said.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out. Be a shame to send you all home without eating." He rattled the cubes in his tumbler and looked over his nose at my uncle.

Luke shuffled his bulky frame across the room. Though he was easily thirty pounds heavier than the older man, my grandfather's wiry frame overshadowed his son, even from his supine position. Luke exchanged his fresh cocktail for my grandfather's empty glass.

"Much obliged," my granddad said. "While that's getting sorted out, who's up for some cribbage?"

A heavy hand on my shoulder halted me mid-acceptance.

"Luke's in no condition to drive," my father said. He stood ramrod-straight beside me. His erect posture and habit of turning his head and shoulders as a single unit often unnerved people. I didn't know it was weird until one of my Little League teammates asked me why my dad moved like Lurch from *The Addams Family*. He lumbered around the dugout, mocking my father, which earned him a bloody nose and black eye. I got grounded, but once my punishment ended, my dad sat me down in the safety of my bedroom and told me the story behind his injury in a war different than my grandfather's.

"You drive," he said.

"Where?" I said. "Nothing's going to be open."

"Don't know until you try. It's only two in the afternoon." He clapped me on the back. "Be safe out there."

I found Luke in the front hall, putting on his overcoat. "Looks like it's you and me," I said, grabbing mine from the closet. His back bowed and chin lowered to his chest. I couldn't tell if he felt deflated because he messed up, or that his seventeen-year-old nephew had been assigned as his handler. He huffed once and waved his arm, ushering me from the chaotic embrace of my grandparents' home. The sky was a low sheet of steel, moisture charging the air. I sniffed at it, my breath leaving my body in suspended puffs. Snow was coming.

Luke's 1993 sand-gray Buick Skylark turned over without protest. While we waited for the heater to come to life, I adjusted the seat and mirrors.

"Any time, Pete," Luke said, eyes trained out the passenger window. His breath fogged a circle on the glass, and he reached up and drew a frowny face. "Any time."

I asked where we were going.

Luke ran his hands back and forth over his head as if the answer were trapped in his hair. "Vogel's," he said.

Once warmed, the car smelled of Luke's aftershave and sour alcohol. He stayed silent and kept his glassy eyes ahead during the fifteen-minute drive to town. I stole glances when I could. With my father being the oldest of six children and Luke the youngest, there was a big gap between them. When I was a kid, he was always pleasant and fun to be around, but we hadn't spent much recent time together. When he was away for school, my family talked around him in his absence, casually dropping half-finished inferences, ones I could never put together to create a complete picture of who Luke was. He could have been a burnout, a black sheep, totally misunderstood, a guy who just made terrible decisions in life, or the child who didn't fit the family



form. Sitting in the car, quiet save for the rhythmic humming of the road, he just seemed normal, average.

We pulled into the Vogel's lot, and Luke grunted from the back of his throat when I parked in front of the darkened deli.

The lights were off, and a closed sign hung askew in the front window, but Luke got out and pulled at the locked door anyway. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the glass. He tried the door again and sidestepped to the display window.

I shouldered beside him and flattened my nose against the window, straining to see the deli's interior. Massive cured wursts and meats hung from the ceiling, their hulking forms eerie in the dim. Rows of sausages and cuts of beef and pork were arranged in one cold case, while another contained an array of cheeses: Brie, Camembert, Swiss, American, Gouda, and Muenster. Limburger, Stilton, and other fragrant selections were kept separately in the middle of the deli. My throat itched, seeing the Gorgonzola's blue veins, and I gagged, recalling its funk in my mouth.

I resumed my search, and there, in the middle of the center case, front and center for all to see, standing proud on an altar of lesser cheeses, shining like a golden beacon, was the extra-sharp cheddar. That block of cheese was the reason we were shivering in the cold while our family made merry. It was the salvation from our plight. Only a plate-glass window and fifteen feet separated us from it. My uncle's face reflected in the front window, his affect flat on both sides of the glass.

Luke needed a win in the family's eyes, I thought, and if we returned empty-handed, he would bear the brunt of scorn. Who knew what came after? I was unsure if my grandmother would really cancel Thanksgiving. Even amongst the most memorable past holidays laden with blown fuses, scorched turkeys, epic emotional meltdowns, and one fistfight, the threat of calling it off had never been leveled. Blood, tears, chipped teeth, and a grease fire hadn't canceled the feast, so it was hard for me to fathom missing cheese would rise to the challenge, but there we were, faces mashed against a delicatessen's front window like kids with empty pockets outside a candy shop.

It was cheese or bust. I ran my hands over the front window and searched for any cracks or chips big enough to exploit and shatter the glass under the guise of an unfortunate accident. Finding nothing, I searched the glass panel on the other side of the door without luck.

I took a step back. "Think this place has an alarm?" I asked.

Luke shot me a side-eye look, forehead still resting on the window.

I sucked the chilled air over my teeth and looked for wires or sensors. I found none. Besides our car, there was only a trash can, some crumpled



paper, a few tin cans, and a broken bottle in the parking lot. I popped the trunk and was reaching for the tire iron when Luke grabbed my forearm.

"Pete," he said. "You're not going to break the window."

"We're a block off Main. Nothing's open. No one will see us. Tomorrow, we can come back and pay them to replace it."

Luke shook his head and released my arm.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go check around back. Maybe someone left a door unlocked."

The first snowflakes floated about, so small the wind swirled them about our heads. I shut the trunk and flipped my collar against the chill, cursing myself for leaving my stocking cap behind.

Luke disappeared around the back of the building. When I caught up with him, he was yanking at the back door, his body shuddering with every jerk of the handle. The door protested but wouldn't yield to his violent assault. He held his six-two, two-hundred-pound body in an aggressive athletic posture, resembling the high school linebacker I remembered wreaking havoc on opposing offenses. His bare hands were mottled white and purple, the skin tented by straining tendons. He jerked again and again, but the door wouldn't budge. Above the din, his growl morphed into a primal scream.

His efforts wilted to half-hearted tugs, eventually ceasing, but he didn't release the door for a good minute, his limp hand wrapped around the handle. Luke turned and slid to the ground, back braced against the metal door. His ruddy face was slick with sweat, and his breaths came in heaving gulps.

I sat beside him and waited while his breathing calmed and his body stopped shaking. He seemed to diminish in size as he recovered, and I sorted through the versions of him I'd either observed over the years or heard about. None of them fit quite right that day, and after seeing the physical display leveled against the door, I couldn't wrap my head around how Luke had cowered at the foot of my grandfather's chair.

"What was it like as a kid?" I asked.

Luke rubbed the back of his neck. "What do you mean? You've grown up here."

"No, I mean, in Grandma and Grandad's house. My dad as your brother."

"Why?"

"I don't know," I said, tossing a rock at a pop can ten feet away, missing widely. "Everyone talks in riddles about you." I threw another, closer but still off target.

He picked up a pebble and struck the can on the first try, the metallic ping sharp in the dry air.

"What are you really asking?"

I wasn't entirely sure.

He picked up another rock but didn't throw it. He tossed it up and caught it with the same hand, repeating the motion, his eyes following the projectile's path. After a dozen throws, he snatched the stone out of the air and pretended to shoot it with a finger gun, completing the sleight of hand by showing me his empty hand. "Come on," he said, pulling me to my feet. "I think I have old man Vogel's number at my house."

Even though we lived only thirty minutes apart, I had never been to Luke's home since he moved back from the city, spending a few years there after school. His life during that time was unknown. He reappeared and slipped into the family fold with as little fanfare as when he left for a small liberal arts college outside of Minneapolis.

We exited the parking lot, returned to Main Street, and headed out of town. Other than the occasional car or person walking, the streets proved deserted. Snowflakes fell harder but were still too light to impair driving. Their lithe forms slid over the windshield by the car's momentum only to melt on the pavement, their existence measured in the time it took to reach the ground.

"Senior this year, right? College?"

I told him I'd applied primarily to in-state schools. Illinois and Michigan State were the furthest out-of-state ones, but the tuition was higher and probably not worth it. I had decent grades and some extracurriculars, but I wasn't a stellar candidate. Most of my classmates would go to the state school in Wausau. My ROTC scholarship packet, which could help get me into Madison or Milwaukee, was pending.

"Do you want to join the military?" he asked.

"I don't know. Yeah, I guess."

"Marines?"

"Is there another option?"

He laughed.

"The tuition money would be nice."

Luke laughed again, but it didn't sound like amusement.

"What?" I asked.

"Just the idea of leveraging your life for money."

I squeezed the steering wheel and pulled myself upright.

"Just something to think about," he said, his voice flattening. "'Don't go into that decision cold.'"

"Why, and chicken out like you did?" I asked. The words slid out of my mouth.

He snapped his head around. "Who told you that?" he asked, and then a moment later said, "No. It doesn't even matter."

Luke drummed his fingers on his knees and inhaled sharply through his nose. The chasing exhalation whistled in the back of his throat.



"In the end, it seemed silly."

"What did?"

"Saluting. Uniforms. Ribbons. Shiny pieces of metal. All of it."

I gritted my teeth and glared at him. He looked pained—head tilted, face tight, eyes trained on a target in the distance.

Before reaching Luke's place, the county highway doubled as the main street through three towns. I decelerated on approach to the first one, and we cruised through downtown, befit with the standard smattering of brick-facade businesses: barber, bakery, an aging five-and-dime, local market, personal injury lawyer, hairdresser, and electronics store. Faded American flags hung off lampposts, impotent without any wind to present them. The snow was gaining volume, dusting the tops of mailboxes and trash cans.

We didn't speak again until we cleared the town.

"I'm not dismissive of your dad's and my dad's service," Luke said. "The country ordered them to go, and they went."

"And that made it easier?" I asked.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"How?"

"They didn't have to choose."

"Get to choose, you mean."

Luke snorted, a dry nasal sound. "That's fair," he said. "Every war is different. Maybe it was easier for my dad than yours."

"Easier?"

"Different wars. Different reasons."

Heat rose from my chest up into my neck. "He nearly died. Grandad, too."

Luke rested a hand on my forearm. "I know."

We pulled into the second town a minute later, and I slowed down again. The central area was a near copy. The shops had different names, but they were a similar package, a brand seemingly immune to the passage of time. Over the subsequent years, the makeup would change. Insert a cupcake or specialty cake shop for the electronics store. Swap out the five-and-dime with a chain pharmacy. Add a bank branch or credit union. Close the local theater, let it sit vacant for two decades, then refit and reopen when people want a cinema draft house. Coffee shops replace tea shops and candle stores, which replace diners. There's some comfort in the perpetuity of the micro-economy of a small town. Part of it makes me gag.

"So what really happened?" I asked once we were back on the highway and my blood had chilled. Snow fell in clumps, piling in the browned grass along the shoulders. I flipped on the windshield wipers.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious," I said.

Luke pulled a pack of gum from his pocket and offered me a piece. A moment later, the sharp scent of spearmint filled the car. He chewed a few times before he spoke.

"The Marine recruiter sat across from me, waiting for my signature." Luke held his hands in front of him as if he were still holding that piece of paper. "My dad was chatting with the recruiter, who was a Vietnam vet. Dad talked about the Pacific theater, mostly funny stories I had heard a hundred times. They compared the size of the bugs, who had worse trench feet, how bad or good the food was. Neither talked about anything real, like the real disease. The killing and bloodshed. I read the words on that paper over and over, getting angrier as they carried on."

We slowed for the final town before we got to Luke's house.

"I was just about to sign, but then I heard the old man mention your dad's Purple Heart, and I froze." Luke's head drifted to the passenger window. "He had such pride in his voice," he whispered.

The rhythmic thump of the car's tires hitting the seams in the concrete filled the empty space. I imagined myself in Luke's shoes, but I couldn't understand why my grandfather shouldn't be proud.

"I'm not following," I finally said. "Dad was a hero."

"Yes. He was. But I remember it differently. Mom crying. Dad chain-smoking while he watched the news every night. They yelled. A lot. Sometimes it escalated."

Luke snapped his gum a few times.

"I grew up wanting to be a Marine. Leatherneck. Devil Dog. Jarhead." His voice trailed off. He took a deep breath. "When your dad left for Vietnam, no one talked to me. Every time the TV was on, I glued my face to the screen." His voice got louder as he spoke, pleading, almost yelling. "Soon, I saw your dad's face on every soldier. Every casualty was him. His cold body in every black bag. Fuck!"

I jumped, and the car swerved. Luke put his hands out to brace himself. I righted the car, and we recovered with matching deep breaths. I thought about watching Desert Storm on television in my pajamas, seeing the night skies light up and the burned-out Iraqi tanks and trucks. Stormin' Norman. Patriot missiles. So quick and clean. It lasted forty-three days.

Luke looked at me, and I nodded for him to continue.

"Then your dad was wounded and came home. Mom was relieved. Dad worried his son would be crippled, so things got worse for a while."

"How long?" I asked.

"He didn't come around until your dad was out of rehab and looked normal."

"Looked normal?" I snapped.

"How much has your dad told you about his injury? His recovery, I mean."



I pursed my lips and kept my eyes straight ahead.

"Same. No one talked about it," Luke said. "But the big brother I knew didn't come back. Not exactly."

Luke wadded his gum up in its wrapper and tossed it out the window.

"So, I stared at that oath of office. I thought about the high-school burn-outs I knew who enlisted. My head spun, and my hands shook. Felt like I was going to throw up. Then, I walked out."

"What'd Granddad do?"

"Five minutes later, he got in the car and said the paperwork was waiting for my signature. I didn't move."

"That's it?" I asked.

"Those were the last words he spoke to me for five years."

Five years, I thought, felt like an impossibly long time not to speak to someone.

"You were still at home for a year to finish high school?"

"Something like that," he said. "Turn here." He pointed. "It's the third house on the left."

Luke's house was a robin's-egg-blue split-level with black shutters and a red door. The snow was falling heavier, sticking to the pavement and the yards but not in the driveway. A black lamppost's artificial flame flickered in the swirling dim light. I shut off the engine, its growl replaced by the muffled touchdown of countless snowflakes on the car.

"And he just started talking to you when you came back?" I asked.

"Still wasn't much, but yeah. I moved back from the city, and we picked up where we left off."

"He's never brought it up?"

"Not once," Luke said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

I followed him to the front door, salt crunching under our boots along the path. I'm not sure what I expected my uncle's home to look like, but I was caught off guard when a warmth enveloped me once through the front door. Luke lined up his boots on the mat, and I followed suit before heading up the five steps to the main level. Plush carpets covered the dark hardwood in the hallway and living room, each with distinct, vibrant geometric patterns. Bookshelves lined three walls, each volume's spine sharply aligned with its neighbors. A recliner of deep brown leather occupied one corner. A massive hi-fi with racks of LPs took up one wall, and a spider plant hung in a clay pot near the front window, its bladed white and green leaves firm and supple.

"Check the fridge, will you?" Luke asked.

"For what?" I asked, still taken aback by the state of his home.

"Anything that might pass muster as cheese. I'm going to look for that phone number."

I pushed through the double-action door into Luke's kitchen. Dishes overflowed the sink, as did garbage in the undersized trash can. Paper, cardboard tubes, crumpled newspapers, and empty food cartons littered every countertop. A layer of grease coated the electric range, and a funk permeated the air. The refrigerator was an old yellow beast, its metal door plastered with magnets holding lists, notes, and reminders on scraps of paper, old receipts, pieces of toilet paper, and even a scribbled-on folded matchbook. *Call me sometime. Pam.* With a phone number below it.

"Anything there?" Luke called from around the corner. I could hear him riffling through papers.

Recovered from the initial shock, I braced myself for what lurked in the fridge. A new smell assaulted me upon opening the door, something unholy, and I knew even if anything approached being cheese, it couldn't be consumed safely. There was little to eat other than condiments, milk, eggs, and two cans of beer, one half-empty. Everything was past its expiration date. Even the jar of pickles was adulterated with some amorphous living mass. I scanned the shelves and drawers and shut the door, wondering how he stayed in decent shape, eating like that.

"Found it," Luke said.

He'd perched himself on a rickety chair beside a half-desk cluttered with phone books and various scraps of paper. Above the desk hung a wall-mounted phone and a corkboard pinned with additional notes and reminders. In the middle of the board was a full sheet of paper with *Cheese!* written in red marker. Luke dialed and waved a slip of paper in my direction, his shoe rapping against the mustard-colored linoleum floor.

"Hello?" Luke spoke into the receiver. "This is Luke Adler. I'm so sorry to—yes, Karl's son—thank you. Happy Thanksgiving to you as well."

Leaving Luke to plead his case, I returned to the living room that belonged in someone else's house. Down the hallway, there were three other doors. One led to a home office, as squared away as the living room. Another led to a bathroom in a similar state of disarray as the kitchen, as was the final room, Luke's bedroom. Clothes piles covered the floor, the bed unmade, and the ceiling fan wobbled in its revolutions, its blades obviously unbalanced.

Luke's voice suddenly rose in pitch and volume, which preceded a slam only a wall-mounted phone could make, the dull ring carrying through the house. I hot-footed back to the living room a moment before he crashed through the swinging door, his face flushed, fists clenched beside his sides. He strode to the middle of the room with his back to me. His shoulders rose, and then his body collapsed with his exhalation. He remained slumped with his back facing me for a minute before he spoke.



"Come on," he said. "Let's get you back." He turned and extended his hand toward me, palm up.

I reared my head back a few inches and was about to tell him my dad's instructions.

"I'm completely sober, and that car is a mess in the snow."

He shook his open hand, and I handed over the keys. The yard was white, with snow rapidly accumulating in the streets. Luke drove with complete attention on the return trip to my grandparents'.

"What do you think I should do?" I asked.

"About joining?"

"Yeah."

Luke kept his eyes forward, squinting through the wipers. "Every generation's military is different. So are their wars."

I thought about what he meant while we made our way through town.

By the time we arrived, the roads were greasy, and although we hadn't done a full fishtail, I felt the rear end slip a few times. He pulled into the driveway and left the car running, making no move to get out.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked.

"I've got one last spot to try," he said.

"Just come inside. I'm sure it's blown over by now."

"It'll be quick." He reached across me and opened my car door.

"You don't have to go," I said.

His upside-down grin left no room for misinterpretation. I got out and watched him back out of the driveway and flounder down the street into the dying light. The skidding of the tires faded, and the world quieted. I listened to the snow falling around me, marveling at the sound of infinite, massless flakes hitting the earth—a muted, deafening paradox.

Ten minutes passed. Luke didn't return. The cold seeped through my clothes, chasing me into the warmth of my grandparents' home. My breath caught in my throat when I stepped through the doorway, the living room packed with my family, standing, sitting, perched on every surface with plates of food and drinks clutched in their hands. A titter passed through the gathering, announcing my return.

Then my dad was beside me, his hand heavy on my shoulder, asking where Luke was. I summarized our odyssey and told him Luke had gone back out into the storm. Concern flushed my father's face, a sight I rarely saw. He levered at the hips to put his ear close to my mouth and asked me to repeat precisely what had happened. The second telling took five minutes, and I left nothing out. Once I finished, he hugged me and told me to get something to eat.

By the time I returned to the living room with a plate, my father had donned his winter boots, jacket, and hat and was huddled in the hall with

my grandad, their heads bowed, only inches apart. I couldn't make out the words over the din, but they spoke in turn, nodding to one another. My granddad reached up and patted my dad's cheek, and my father sharply turned on his heel and made for the front door.

I set my plate down to follow, but my father's disconsolate half-smile froze me. He nodded once and left. I followed as far as the front window and observed multiple images of my father through the beveled diamond panes. I pressed my eye against one for a clear view of him marching down the walk. In short order, he had chained his truck's tires, and his taillights disappeared into the squall. By then, it was a proper snowstorm.

The food proved lukewarm and made for a singular bland taste in my mouth, whether a bite of turkey, scalloped potatoes, cranberry sauce, or roasted vegetables. My grandmother scoffed at my half-eaten plate, hinting at her reluctance to allow me anything from the dessert table, which was conspicuously lacking apple pie. Its requisite cheddar cheese was still absent. It made no difference to me. My stomach felt conflicted, somehow both hollow and bloated. I shuffled back to the living room and snatched a vacant chair beside the stereo. My grandad loved marches and, per custom, had put on a John Philip Sousa record. Staccato drums and horns filled the room, the upbeat music an odd companion to the mood of the evening.

I thumbed through an assortment of other LPs to pass the time, reading the jacket notes and running my fingers over the pressed vinyl. I don't remember falling asleep, but I woke with a start when my dad burst through the door, clutching my uncle to his side. Luke's face looked pained, and he was shaking uncontrollably. My grandad shot out of his chair and roared to action, barking orders for dry clothes, blankets, and a warm bath. I fought my way to Luke's side and shouldered half of his body over mine, offloading some weight from my father. Luke's mass nearly crumpled me to the floor.

"Found him in a snowbank outside of Vogel's," my dad said. "Front window was smashed."

We staggered to the master bathroom, where my grandmother cleared the room of everyone else. Grandad was on bath duty while my dad and I stripped Luke of his clothes, tossing them out the door. The water was tepid, but Luke yelped when his legs slipped beneath the surface. He screamed louder when his arms went under, the water swirling pink and red as rivulets of blood flowed from open wounds on his hands and wrists.

We opened the drain, and ran the water progressively warmer. Luke's wounds kept bleeding, so my dad had Luke hang his arms out of the tub while he bandaged them. Luke's skin was tight and flushed, his lips a deep purple. He mumbled through his clenched teeth, unable to sound out proper words. His breathing was deep and raspy like he was sucking air through a sponge.



The bandages stanching the flow, but blood still soaked through. He needed to go to the hospital. We pulled Luke out of the tub, towed him off, and layered him in thick clothes. Winter boots, three scarves, and two hats went on. Once again, I was told to stay behind.

Luke's bloodied clothes went into the trash. Someone shut off the music. The storm raged, so no one else left. Half-hearted conversations sputtered to life, then died. Forks scraped on plates as family members finished their meals, and then everyone went to work cleaning up. Some offered to take my grandmother's position at the sink, but she waved them away like a soldier refusing to relinquish her post.

A few hours later, my dad phoned from the hospital. Luke was in the ICU. His lungs had taken a hit, and a ventilator was keeping him alive. The storm petered out, and eventually the family dispersed. My grandmother sat upright in my grandfather's chair, fingers methodically snapping a rosary bead with every softly uttered Hail Mary. I fell asleep on the couch with my mom stroking my hair. Dad came back early the next morning.

The ICU waiting room was packed with family like it was a continuation of the previous night. Most hadn't changed their clothes, and their clipped conversations continued in hushed voices. I wasn't allowed to see Luke, so I stood in a corner and listened to the cacophony. My brain swam trying to reconcile it all.

Three days passed, and the group thinned, retreating to their lives. Luke's lungs worsened. The doctor said it was acute respiratory distress syndrome. He was drowning in his hospital bed, fluid produced by his own cells choking the life out of him.

As the closest surviving kin, my grandparents signed the hospital papers to release Luke's body to the funeral home.

I didn't join the Marines going into college, but at the beginning of my junior year, the towers fell. On my third deployment, my R&R fell over Thanksgiving. In the airport, a man sat down next to me and asked where I was coming from. Staring at the man, the last image of my uncle, grin inverted, came to me. I heard myself telling Luke that he didn't have to go, understanding exactly why he needed to. I told the man I was coming from fighting in Afghanistan.

"I didn't know we were still there," he said.