

New Nonfiction from Lauren Kay Johnson: “Inheritance of War” an Excerpt from The Fine Art of Camouflage



I swore I would never become a soldier like my mother.

She called it a blip, a few months out of an otherwise enjoyable career with the Army. No one saw the blip coming. Both of my grandfathers served in the military, but their wars stayed cold. My mom's reserve unit, Seattle's Fiftieth General Hospital, with 750 personnel, was too big, too expensive deploy, the very reason she'd chosen the unit. After three years as an active-duty Army nurse, she wanted to start a family. The Fiftieth promised stability; for them to deploy, it would take World War III.

On Thanksgiving weekend of 1990, my mom got a phone call. She had been receiving practice calls ever since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, drills to make sure the phone tree was accurate, to keep everyone prepared. This time, the call wasn't a drill. The unit was put on alert for deployment orders. My sister, brother, and I were asleep, so we didn't see the white-faced shock when Mom answered the phone. We didn't watch her crumple into Dad's arms when she told him or see the shock mirrored in his own face as questions of her safety, the family's well-being, single parenthood flooded his mind.

Mom and her hospital unit wouldn't receive orders right away. They would spend Thanksgiving with their families, worrying and hoping—hoping World War III would dissipate with the holiday weekend; hoping their orders would leave them as local

backfill for active-duty soldiers who deployed or send them to Germany, the unit's assigned overseas operating location based on the Cold War model; hoping their orders would be short.

None of these hopes materialized. Mom's orders were for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for an undetermined length of up to two years.

I hardly recall the Army's presence in our family before Desert Storm. The Army slipped in and out one weekend a month and two weeks a year when Mom put on green clothes and went "camping." Sometimes we ate hotdogs and pretended to camp too. With that Thanksgiving phone call, though, the Army consumed us. I had just turned seven, my sister, Shavonne, was eight, and my brother, Matt, barely two. Suddenly, we were no longer a regular young family. Mom had always been the center mass around which we all orbited, and now our gravity field had shifted. In preparation for the deployment, she took frequent trips to the local Army base, sometimes for days at a time. Big green Army bags piled up in the living room where we used to build puzzles and pillow forts. Instead of driving to school with Mom, Shavonne and I went to daycare with Matt early in the morning when Dad left for work. Neighbors stopped by our house to drop off funny-tasting casseroles. They said nice things like, "We're praying for you," and "Let us know if you need anything." I just needed my mom. I was restless in school and gymnastics practice, anxious to get home and hug Mom and hold onto her forever.

Before she left for Saudi Arabia, I told my mom I hated the Army. "Oh sweetie," she said, "I know it feels like the Army is being mean, but it's the Army's job to go help people. A bad man invaded another country, and we need to go help the people there and get him out." With that, she redirected my

hatred to Saddam Hussein. The Army wasn't taking Mom away; a bad man was making her leave. Shavonne and I even learned a song about that man and how much we all hated him. We sang the song over and over, and Mom laughed the hardest:

Joy to the world, Saddam is dead!

We barbequed his head!

Don't worry 'bout the body

We flushed it down the potty,

And round and round it goes . . .

I don't remember this, but my parents tell me that before she deployed, I asked Mom if she could die. I imagine myself climbing into her lap. In my mind she's wearing the soft blue bathrobe she had when I was growing up. I'm clutching it, nuzzling into her brown permed curls. Mom wraps her fuzzy blue arms around me, and I can feel her heartbeat, strong and serious. She gazes out through her thick-framed glasses, her eyes light like mine above the long, sharp nose and freckles inherited by Shavonne. Mom purses her lips. She's thinking about my question, about my life—all our lives—without her. She's thinking about the briefings the hospital unit received, the expectations of chemical weapons and massive casualties, the potential for an attack on Israel and an ensuing holy war of nuclear proportions. She's thinking this might be a suicide mission. Mom pulls me closer and strokes the top of my head, trying to memorize the feel of me. She's weighing her need to protect her child with a desire for honesty.

She answered my question: "I'm going to do the best I can to come back to you as soon as I can."

"Don't tell her that!" my dad said. "Tell her no!" But my mom couldn't lie.

Just before she left, Mom wove Shavonne's and my hair into double French braids, like she did when we had soccer or T-ball games, the only thing that would keep my thin hair and Shavonne's unruly curls in place under helmets and through trips up and down the field. These braids were special, though. They held the memory of Mom's touch: her gentle fingers brushing across my scalp, the nail of her little finger drawing a part down each side, her soft breath on the back of my neck. I wanted to keep the braids forever. I promised Mom I would. It would be our connection while she was gone, and every time I looked in the mirror I would think of her.

Mom deployed right after Christmas. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, and the occasion carried extra weight in 1990 because we had Mom with us. The Christmas morning snowfall seemed magical to us kids but made a treacherous drive for our relatives, who commuted several hours for everyone to be together. I don't know if our house has ever been so full; it's funny how war brings people together. We had an epic snowball fight with my cousins, opened presents, ate roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy, and took pictures around the Christmas tree, just like every year.

A few days later, we watched Mom board an Army transport bus. She waved to us through a grimy window until her pale face was lost to camouflage and dust and distance. On the bus she was surrounded by other moms and dads, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and a single twenty-something medic. The medic had no family to wave to through the grimy window, but he saw us: a man with red-rimmed eyes standing next to two girls with double French braids. Both girls clung to the man and cried. In the man's arms was a small boy. The young soldier couldn't hear it, but the boy repeated, "Where's Mommy going?" over and over, long after the bus rolled out of sight.

"Looking at your family when we left was my war moment," the medic later told my mom. "Seeing how heartbroken they were."

My memories of Mom's deployment blur into a fuzzy background, punctuated by snapshot images of clarity. I remember cheese quesadillas, "cheese pies" I called them, cooked in the microwave. A neighborhood mom who watched us after school served them to us while we waited at her house for Dad to pick us up. One day while there, I got the stomach flu. The neighbor tucked me into a nest of blankets on the couch with Gatorade and a bucket, but I kept getting up. I walked to the hallway and threw up. I threw up in the living room. I kept walking, looking for my mom.

As the days passed, oil slickened my hair and my precious braids started to unwind. I remember an angry fit of protest, and an ultimate compromise. Every few days the gracious neighbor cleaned and re-braided my hair. It looked exactly the same. But it wasn't.

I cried every night in bed after Mom's tape-recorded voice finished reading a bedtime story. I saw the school counselor for a few weeks. I don't recall her name or what she looked like or even what we talked about, but I remember staring out her window at the snow-crusted ground. My classmates were at recess, throwing snowballs, having fun. For the first time I did not feel normal.

We were the only local kids who had a parent deployed. Neighbors took turns babysitting and delivering meals. A yellow ribbon hugged the big maple tree in front of our elementary school. When she returned, my mom would cut the ribbon off to a whooping chorus of cheers from our classmates. But while she was gone it hung there, through rain and wind and snow. I saw the ribbon every day, and I hated it.

We lived for weekly calls from Mom, letters, occasional pictures, anything to let us know she was safe. Each trip to the mailbox was its own tiny Christmas, marked by expectation and, too often, when no letters came, disappointment. At one point, Mom sent Shavonne and me matching T-shirts with pictures of camels wearing combat boots and gas masks. I still have that shirt, a child's size small, buried in the back of a drawer. Dad pointed out Saudi Arabia on our office globe. Mom was there, inside the little star that represented the capital of Riyadh. It didn't look very far away.

We watched news reports every evening on TV. Headlines that spring covered topics that interest me now as an adult: an escalation of violence in Sudan following the imposition of nationwide Islamic law, an historic meeting between Nelson Mandela and Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Haiti's appointment of its first elected president, the controversy over Dr. Jack Kevorkian's assisted suicides, the Exxon Valdez oil spill. In 1991, I could focus only on the war. My world expanded exponentially when Mom deployed; I wasn't yet ready to stretch beyond the Middle East. Besides, the Middle East was everywhere, dominating TV, radio, and newspaper reports. In a letter home Mom noted that we were probably getting more news of the war than she was; TV was censored in Saudi Arabia, and she didn't have free time to watch anyway.

In the States, we witnessed a new era in broadcasting, the first time war received real-time coverage from reporters on the ground. They showed awesome footage of planes taking off from aircraft carriers and terrifying shots of exploding missiles. All around were people in camouflage, but not the green and black my mom wore on Reserve duty. These uniforms were brown like dirt. There was a lot of dirt on the news when they talked about the war. I thought it must be hard for Mom to stay clean. I had never watched the news before. Sitting on the couch, my legs curled beneath me, I got my first exposure to the industry of which one day I would be a part. As a

public affairs officer I would be there, against the dusty brown backdrop of war, ushering reporters, directing camera angles, providing talking points to the people in camouflage, filtering conflict for the families back home.

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm represented a new era in warfare too. Mom was part of the largest reserve component ever activated in support of an armed conflict, and the first involuntary call requiring reservists to report to active duty since the dissolution of the draft. In total, the government activated more than 227,000 reservists. The Army provided the bulk of personnel, nearly 140,000, with around fourteen percent in medical specialties like Mom's hospital unit. Mom was also part of the largest contingent of U.S. military women ever to deploy. By war's end, 40,000 women had served overseas, almost as many as had been on active duty during the height of America's last large-scale conflict, the Vietnam War. Desert Storm saw two American women held as Prisoners of War, and thirteen killed in action.

Sometimes on the news they talked about people dying. At recess one day I was by myself, as I often was during that time, wandering along the edge of the concrete basketball court, when my class bully sauntered up to me. "Hey, I heard about a lady that got killed in the war," he chided, "Do you think it was your mom?"

I hadn't heard about the lady. Had she been on the news the night before? No one had called to tell us something bad had happened. Wouldn't they call? But what if they had called; what if Dad answered and didn't want to tell us before school? What if they knocked on our door but no one was home? Maybe the bully had seen a news report that I'd missed? The thought of never seeing my mom again overwhelmed me, and I sat down on the concrete and cried for a long time.

While Mom was gone, we made up games to make time and distance not seem so massive, to trick ourselves into feeling like we might have some sort of control. For “When will Mom come home?” the whole family—my dad, sister, brother, grandparents, and I—scribbled our return date guesses across the calendar. My sister’s prediction, March 12, 1991, was the earliest, three and a half months after Mom’s departure. The rest of us hoped but doubted she was close.

As March arrived, we only got a couple days’ notice that Shavonne’s guess was exactly right. As suddenly as war had swooped into our lives, it ended. We let ourselves be consumed by frenzied preparations for Mom’s homecoming, spending hours tracing letters and gluing glitter onto bright sheets of poster board. There were trips to Party City to buy trunkloads of yellow ribbons and American flags. We must have alerted the relatives the elementary school, my Girl Scout troop, the whole neighborhood, and Mom’s college roommate, because hordes of them showed up at McChord Air Force Base outside Seattle on the morning of March 12.

Together we stood behind a chain link fence, a crowd of hundreds, watching the empty runway. Shavonne and I held signs and chattered with our classmates. Matt, too young to understand where Mommy had been or why, just knew that this was the day she was coming home. He coiled his tiny hands around the fence and rocked back and forth, back and forth, eyes glued to the tarmac. His expectant little face, framed by a puffy black and red jacket, became a popular clip on local news segments.

I don’t know how long we waited before we heard the drone of an approaching aircraft. The crowd hushed. We twisted our heads frantically and shielded our eyes from the sun. A dark speck emerged on the horizon, and we erupted into a cacophony of cheers. The dark speck got bigger and turned into a place

that drifted slowly across the landscape. As it inched closer, the crowd grew wild. We screamed and shook the fence. My dad scooped up my brother. Someone, a grandparent maybe, grabbed my hand. Reporters yelled into their microphones. We were supposed to stay behind the fence, but when the plane landed and the first camouflaged figure emerged, we stampeded the runway. All I could see was legs: jeans and khakis and sweats, then a trickle of camouflage moving upstream, and then a pair of legs that stopped and dropped a bag and bent and hugged and cried, and then I was in her arms and nuzzling my face into her hair and the world was whole again.

For a while after her deployment, I screamed every time Mom put on her uniform. Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there.

We were extra thankful on Thanksgiving when the phone didn't ring. We got teary-eyed whenever Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." came on the radio, an anthem for Mom's unit. For years, our schools asked Mom to give Veterans' Day speeches, and Shavonne and I modeled Saudi Arabian clothes she'd brought back as souvenirs: black draping capes and veils that covered everything except a square around our eyes, similar to the burqas I'd see eighteen years later in Afghanistan. I loved being a part of Mom's experience, if only from under the veil. I liked to twirl and see the fabric billow around me. Mostly I liked watching my mom.

She talked about how difficult life was for women in Saudi Arabia. "They have to cover all their skin, even when it's really hot outside," she said. "If they don't, the police can arrest them! And they aren't allowed to drive!" Even as an

American, Mom said, she couldn't go certain places because she was a woman. She told our classmates about the armed guards on the hospital buses and around the compound to help keep the doctors and nurses safe. Mom shared that she was afraid at first to take care of Iraqi prisoners, but she learned that they only fought because their families were threatened by Saddam Hussein. I thought how brave she was and how lucky I was to have a mom who was more than just a mom, but also a soldier, a healer, and a hero who helped save people from that mean man. After Mom finished speaking everyone clapped for her, and I beamed under my veil.

I didn't know how painful those events were for my mom. I didn't realize she struggled diving back into her roles as wife and mother and everything else we heaped on her. She didn't discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn't know she carried trauma with her every day, even after she returned home. I didn't understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough.

