

March Past

I stand in front of six hundred kids on a parade square, in an air force base in Greenwood, Nova Scotia. I'm a kid myself. Maybe fourteen; plain, starched, and over-confident. A statuette. A girl in blue. It's air cadet camp graduation day, and it's thirty-eight degrees. I am the deputy parade commander and a goddamned star.

Wing, At-ten-tion!

Wing complies. Knees lift, fists form, elbows lock and a single glorious stomp echoes around the world. Palm fronds tremble, cows low and dictators weep. They hear me in France. They see me from the moon. Officers smile. They puff their chests. These brassed men and bunned women. Soldiers with pins in their wrists and melted ears and burnt hearts. At breakfast one had whispered in my ear: *you. are. good.*

My parents aren't here to watch. They are moving from Nova Scotia to New Brunswick. They've bought an inn surrounded by marshland and mud. A Victorian horror, with ancient beds and hidden walls and tired staff. They've bought a dream. I'm commanding one.

Wing, Right, Dress.

Wing complies. Heads turn, arms lift, boots shuffle. Wing makes beautiful lines. Like grown-ups. Like pros. It is unusual, this synchronicity. Because these kids are not the same. Some are short. Some are giants. All legs or limbs or lips. Some are poor. Some are hurt. Some are here as punishment. Kids caught stealing, smoking, or skipping school. Sleeping around. Some know French, play football, sew clothes. Cadets is free. Anyone can join. Anyone can learn to march, or polish a boot. Anyone can learn to fly. Anyone can learn to be good.

My bedroom is gone. It's in a U-Haul somewhere. Along with my skateboard. My report cards and ribbons. Badges. Medals. Trophies. My love notes and autographs. Playbills. Gold-bordered certificates. All bits of happiness. Proof that I exist. Proof that I am in fact, *good*.

I imagine my parents pulling into a Big Stop, fueling up, cooling down with a cold drink, a wobbly piece of pie and then continuing on, unable to see me in the rearview mirror, unable to hear my enunciation, the sharpness in my voice. The conviction of my commands, my perfect pitch. The sounds of how good I am.

Eyes, Front.

Wing stares straight ahead. All of us focused and in line. Starting lines. Adulthood is a Shakespeare essay and an airstrip away. A first kiss, a first kill, a first trip overseas. First year university. An apartment for one. I let that knowledge sink in. The end of camp, the end of summer, the near end of childhood. No more lip-syncing or drinking from hoses. No more mandatory gym classes, slam books, love notes, parties in the woods. No more building something from nothing, day dreaming, believing we can be somebody. Believing we are good.

My parents have probably made it to New Brunswick by now. Parked next door in the driveway of the yellow house with the red pane glass in the door. They will choose my room for me, stack boxes in corners. Leave my skateboard in the mudroom, put away winter coats. I imagine they'll walk the property, talk to the staff, fix kinks in carpets, sweep crumbs and empty ashtrays. The restaurant will be closed now but they will consult with the chef. They'll ask about the night's special and I will reply, *I'm right here!*

Wing will march past in column of route. Move to the right in column of route. Right, Turn.

There's only time to breathe, to squint through the heat haze that's turning everything into blurs. Podiums, politicians, flags, memories.

In New Brunswick a train behind the marsh will blast its whistle three times, lifting my parents' hair, blowing up their sleeve cuffs, drowning me out.

By the Centre, Quick-March!

I step-off. Eighty-five centimeters, then adjust to seventy-five, one hundred twenty beats per minute, arms swinging at ninety degrees, spine tall, heart full. I am leading the parade, the wing, a kid in command. With each boom of the base drum, each toss of the mace, each nod of approval, I believe I can fly. That I am good and will be in perpetuity because there will be more parades and they will always need commanders.

I want to march to New Brunswick. With my wing. All six hundred birds. We will crowd into the parking lot of the inn, fill every square foot, every inch of crumbling pavement. The band will play something grand and my parents will clap. They will know I'm good.

Wing, Eyes, Right.

The march past. I call the command. I salute. I have a perfect salute. How many times did I practice in the mirror? Checking the placement of my thumb, my fingertips, the stretch of my hand, the bend of arm, the angle. All eyes are on me. Not the cadets' eyes, but the dignitaries. The people that matter. The bigwigs, the brass, the local businessmen. The valley reporter. Behold the deputy wing commander, the girl, the future.

But my parents don't see. They are lost among bulrushes and chives and white sheets on the line. They are lost in a beginning and the parade is almost over.

Wing, Halt.

It is hotter now. Kids have been standing for hours. Cadets sway, sweat, faint. Medics and warrant officers lead them away and I leave my post, my parade duty finished. All that's left is for me to return to the back of the line. The rear. Alone. Where no one can see me. The last time I am *good*.