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After Iraq: A Story of Love, War, and Faith

When Rebekah Benimoff's husband returned from his second tour of duty as an Army chaplain in Iraq, she watched in horror as he — and their marriage — completely unraveled.



*To: Roger
From: Rebekah
Re: Missing You
Date: April 4, 2005
Dear Honey,
I do not have long tonight, as I have an early morning tomorrow, but I wanted to...tell you that I miss you terribly! Today Blaine told me he misses you and wants to be an "Army man like Daddy."... I asked him what things he misses, and he said, "Horsey."... I told him you miss him too, and that when he comes back, you will give him hugs and kisses and tickles and let him ride on the horsey. Before I go, Kelly said that she was told by her FRG [Family Readiness Group] that we are not supposed to send coffee, as "the Iraq drug-sniffing dogs have not been trained to distinguish between drugs and coffee." Do you know anything about this?*

My husband, Roger, loves Starbucks. Sending him caffeinated care packages to Iraq, where all the soldiers were sleep-deprived, meant the world to him. As an Army chaplain, he was not allowed to carry a weapon; a pocketknife was the most violent object you'd ever find on him. He had the rank of captain and was the sole spiritual counselor to 1,000 soldiers — and often more, given that mental-health professionals were few and far between at the northern border outpost where he was stationed in the spring of 2005.

Roger had devoted his life to God and to soldiers, and this was his second deployment to Iraq. His work involved everything from ministering to medics after they couldn't revive a corpse to counseling soldiers with whom he'd grown close — men who would die before seeing their first child born. He would pastor soldiers who had just survived ambushes or lost their wives to other men back home; he'd orchestrate memorial services for the killed and weekly sermons for the living.

My job was to hold our family together during the year he'd be gone. We lived in a town house "on post" as we called it, where the 3rd Armored Cavalry was headquartered in Fort Carson, CO. Roger and I had been married nine years when he left for his second deployment. Our son Blaine was 3, and Tyler — who had recently been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes — was 5. I had to be on high alert for Tyler at all times, in case he had a seizure or low blood sugar. When an episode did hit, I found myself wishing that Roger were not half a world away, risking his safety when we had life-and-death issues here at home too.

Our marriage had its challenges, as all do, but mostly we were a happy family. Roger and I had met in college. I brought him to my Bible studies, and he got me involved in the local church. We were like a tag team in our faith, and that bond was a pillar of our relationship. Early in our marriage, we taught backyard Bible clubs together. His faith deepened, and, feeling that he was called to the ministry, I encouraged him in his desire to

go to seminary. Because he had served in the Army following high school, one of his first roles after graduating seminary was as a chaplain in the National Guard. He enjoyed the ministry so much that despite my previous resistance to full-time military life, I was moved and told him I would support him if he decided to become a full-time chaplain, which he did after 9/11. Throughout these early years of our marriage, we talked often and intimately about our faith — what we were learning and how we were growing in our relationship with God.

When Roger wasn't in Iraq, our lives were fairly simple. He ministered on our post while I taught Sunday school and sang on our church's praise team. We went on family outings, and before he left, we took tons of home videos so the boys could feel bonded to him and — it's hard to even say these words — just in case something terrible happened. After Roger left, I was what we called a "geographically single mom." I was lonely, but as my friend Laurie once said, "Sometimes God has to get us alone to accomplish the work in us that He wants to do."

I felt most alone in the moments when I could not ease my sons' longing for their father. One day Tyler came home from kindergarten terrified. A kid on the playground had been talking about soldiers getting killed. "Is Daddy going to die?" he asked, starting to cry. I said Daddy was safe, waiting for the soldiers back at the chapel. I only later learned he was usually not at the chapel but rather traveling in convoys to lead prayers and counsel soldiers — and getting shot at more than once.

Re: Love U!!!

Date: August 22, 2005

Dear Honey,

What stood out the most from your letter was that we should have lots of sex. Cute!! Not that we needed a reason to have sex!!! Usually we do not have a problem with that!! We should have the healthiest marriage around — at least when you are home!! =)

Okay, this is embarrassing, of course (note to all my family members: Please forget you just read that!), but it was important in e-mails to keep our romance alive. If it weren't for the little intimacies, the loneliness here at home for me and the grimness of Iraq for Roger would have been overwhelming.

I missed him terribly. Roger was deeply committed to me and to the boys. He was always looking for ways we could grow closer as a couple, and I often felt I had an almost-perfect husband. He was also a deeply committed chaplain. Roger had once been a soldier himself — a fuel specialist — and that seemed to cement a unique bond between him and his soldiers.

Re: Hi

Date: August 29, 2005

Hello Honey,

So sorry there was another death! (I will be praying!) Today has been rough, and I'm sure things are not better where you are. There were two notifications in the neighborhood today...and the rumor mill was in full swing that not all the notifications were complete.... There was also a KIA [Killed In Action] notification to one of the girls who I also know from the chapel.

Two women on my block were now widows, and a third was notified the following day. As Roger counseled the survivors in Iraq, we all reeled in shock back at home. We often felt that God was answering our prayers and protecting our soldiers, and when horrible things happened, it was hard to reconcile our beliefs with reality. In the coming months, Roger would begin to question how a loving God would protect some and not others. I myself came to the conclusion that there is much suffering in this world, and while God does not cause it, He desires to walk with us through it.

In retrospect, I wish I had managed to make more time for long talks with Roger by phone — something so hard with the time difference and two kids underfoot. It was a comfort that he badly needed. After half a year in Iraq, he still had five more months before he'd be coming home, and little did I know that his ability to accept that comfort from me would rapidly diminish in the months following his return.

Re: Conference

Date: September 14, 2005

Dear Honey,

How are you? You sounded very depressed the last couple of times we've talked.... At the conference, they said we need to tell our soldier about any changes in appearance of the house or persons.... So, I want to tell you

that my hair is more red again. Also Laurie and I rearranged the living room, and I put different curtains up in the kitchen...the lace ones we had in that trailer at seminary.

By the time Roger came home that winter, the kids and I had changed, and so had he. It was as if all of us had "grown up" some. I was so glad to have him back, even if he seemed a little bit distant at times. The boys could now play with each other and didn't need my attention quite as desperately as before. I was learning how to say no to obligations outside of church and family, a big change for me after getting sick one too many times from stress.

We were happy at first, and the changes in Roger seemed superficial. His new job was to help his regiment's 4,500 soldiers peacefully transition home from their deployment. He arranged seminars in everything from reconnecting with families to the warning signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I wanted him home for family dinners, but we knew his program for the returning soldiers was both important and temporary — it was a matter of a month or so to ease them back into home life — so we let the family dinners slide, which was a mistake.

Before long, Roger began acting strangely. He wouldn't stop exercising, as if he was running away from something. He wanted to eat only Special K and oatmeal, which meant we couldn't share a meal together as a family. We'd cuddle up in front of the TV, but then he'd jump off the couch to do hundreds of push-ups. He lost 30 pounds in two months. I gave him time to unwind, but when he skipped a birthday party for the boys, I knew something was seriously wrong. All he said was that he "couldn't handle it," that the party would be "too chaotic" for him. He was "hypervigilant," a word I had never heard but have come to know well. He suddenly couldn't stand crowds or noise. At times it seemed he couldn't stand people. He'd be loving one minute and despondent the next.

In the spring of 2006, we began packing. Roger was accepted to a residency chaplain position at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, DC, one of the oldest and most prestigious Army hospitals in the United States. I worried about the move because I knew Roger wasn't his usual self, but I hoped he would adjust to being out of a war zone soon.

Journal, July 10, 2006

I do not know how to deal with Roger. Moving seemed to set off some deep-seated anger in him.... He cannot answer simple questions.... I ask him, "Do you want a sandwich?" and his answer is so often, "I can't talk about that right now."... This drives me crazy...but...I do not think he is being difficult on purpose. It is most difficult to handle the times when simple discussions cause him to blow up. Sometimes he says he feels "emotionally bullied," like when I ask him, "What groceries do you need from the store?"

I would eventually come to call our time on the East Coast our "year of destruction."

In the coming months, Roger would unravel, and so would Walter Reed, which became the center of a national scandal over its care of veterans. These were not the veterans Roger worked with — he was new and had been appointed to the psych ward — but he later joined the exhaustive effort to try to repair things, even as he himself was falling apart. Each day he counseled soldiers with PTSD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and more. He came home after the boys and I were asleep and left before we woke up. On some days he worked 24-hour shifts. Our sex life came to a screeching halt. A few times I'd delicately ask, "Could we have some 'alone time' tonight?" and he'd just say, "I'm not up to it." I felt rejected, confused, and, most of all, locked out of what was going on with him.

He also began overspending, accruing a secret debt I'd later learn added up to almost \$20,000. He was buying golf gear, gadgets, clothing, and — not so secret — even a car. I had no friends nearby to turn to. We were now renting a house in a civilian neighborhood in Maryland, no Army wives or family in sight. I was beginning the loneliest period of my life.

One day we set out for a rare family outing to the park. We got into the minivan, and I decided to press Roger about rejoining our family. He screamed, "Shut up! Just shut up, and go away!" I was shocked. My first concern was the boys, but I had let them wear headphones and watch a DVD, so they were oblivious. After a while it seemed like Roger was yelling at some unseen force, not me. It was during these moments that I judged there was a spiritual element to whatever was going on with him, as his distress seemed to go deeper than the subject I was pushing him on. This was sobering. It seemed like he wasn't just battling me, he was battling something inside himself.

When we reached the park, Roger calmed down and began pushing the boys on the swings. I sat on a bench far from them. I remembered the Bible verse Genesis 32:24, which says, "Jacob was left alone, and he wrestled with [God] until daybreak"...and like Jacob, I felt I was also wrestling with God. Then I felt a calm voice tell me that I "had a choice." What I wanted to do *with every fiber in my being* was take the boys with me and go home to my family in Austin to get some reprieve from the chaos. But the boys would have understood there was a problem, and I'd be abandoning my husband when he wasn't altogether healthy. I said, almost out loud, "I am not strong enough." And then I heard the voice again. "That is precisely the point." I would need to rely on God, and God alone.

Journal, July 2006

The way he reacts to normal everyday life does not make sense.

As the months wore on, and as Roger spiraled ever downward, it got harder to hold on to anything. We no longer argued. I would just say something, and he would vent and yell, and soon I stopped saying much at all. By September, Roger finally realized he needed help and went to a psychiatrist at Walter Reed, who prescribed him a cornucopia of medications, including Klonopin and Trazodone, for anxiety and insomnia.

Journal, October 2006

I am very angry with Roger for being angry all the time. I need some help parenting. He used to remind me to give the boys grace, and help me find solutions. Now he just yells at me and causes me more stress when I try to share my struggles. I know I am to stay in the marriage, but I have much trouble seeing any hope.

My mother and father were in town, and we went to visit the Air and Space Museum. Roger drove like a maniac despite repeated requests to slow down. He'd say things like, "I've been trained by the government" or "This is your tax dollars at work." When we got to the museum, he fell asleep, sitting up, on one of the hard green benches by the displays.

My parents were concerned. My dad is a man of few words and just said that something was "not right" with Roger. My mother thought of Roger as her own child and was extremely concerned for all of us, including for our safety. It was obvious that my father was worried, and I think that's one of the things that made Roger see that he might need more help.

Journal, November 1, 2006

Every now and then, Roger shares something that helps me see into the great amount of grief he is carrying, but then he closes up. After going to the National Cemetery, he shared about his soldiers and just sobbed. I feel compassion for him in these times, but then he puts that hard, bitter facade on, and I have no clue how to handle him. I have fallen into the habit of...avoiding him as much as possible.

I thought our faith would hold us together, but Roger now wanted little to do with God. Not that going to church means everything, but when a chaplain refuses to go at all, that can't mean anything good. I began to feel like I was carrying a heavy burden. I was the wife of a chaplain who didn't seem to believe in God, or at the very least was exceedingly angry with God.

That fall Roger was diagnosed by his psychiatrist at Walter Reed with chronic PTSD. To his credit, in November, Roger admitted himself into a Pennsylvania facility where he had once trained as a counselor — a sad irony that was not lost on us. He would stay for three months. It was like another deployment, only this time the war was in his mind, not in another country.

Journal, January 2007

I did not connect with the reality that Roger is in treatment — until today. When he began to bring home ceramics on his weekend visits, it hit me that he was in a mental facility. On TV you always see people who are going through various types of rehabilitation painting or doing art...and when I picture my husband doing this, I begin to see the extent of his brokenness. I wonder if he will get better and why God has allowed this.... I need a break, and I need support.... I miss my family, and I miss my friends from Fort Carson. My husband is falling apart. Father God, I want to give up, but I won't.

One night I read the boys a pamphlet designed for the children of soldiers with PTSD. Tyler said, "Daddy is mad all the time," and Blaine said, "Daddy yells a lot." Later Tyler asked, "Is that why Daddy doesn't care about us anymore?"

It was hard those winter months to know what Roger really did care about. The adrenaline of Iraq had drained out of him, leaving him empty. Perhaps that's why, while at the facility, Roger wrote in his journal: "Why am I so angry? I do not want anything to do with God. I am sick of religion."

Roger eventually returned to his job and his training at Walter Reed but wondered if his future as an Army chaplain was over. How could he be a chaplain if he was writing that he "hated" God? And how could I stay in a marriage with a man who had disappeared, both as a husband and as a pastor? It was hard to see what there was to hold on to.

Journal, March 8, 2007

Yesterday Roger came home and said, "I'm done." I was feeling both compassion for his struggles, and much fear. We discussed him being out of the Army within four months.... So little time to prepare. It is so challenging to walk by faith.... I can see he is under a great deal of stress, and there is so much uncertainty. Will we stay in the Army? Will he retire? Roger is considering getting a medical discharge. What does this mean as far as medical coverage for the kids...especially Tyler? We have to have really good insurance to cover all his diabetic supplies. I'm not ready to go back to work.... I've enjoyed the freedom, but I do not want Roger to be miserable, either. I confess I am afraid of the unknown.

As a child asks why he has to eat his vegetables, I asked why I had to be going through this. Simplistic, yes, but for a mother of young children, the vegetable example really hit home. I hoped we'd grow, in some way. With Roger's PTSD, all the emphasis was on him. I understood this and supported him, but I also had my own unmet needs. I gave up on being the kind of family that goes to town festivals, greets neighbors, and enjoys life. The reality was that Roger could not handle crowds. So I focused on the kinds of celebrations our family *could* do and still include Roger. We'd have a birthday gathering with just the four of us. And we hid our eggs in our backyard for the boys to hunt, rather than go to the big Easter extravaganza at a nearby church. My world seemed to be shrinking.

Journal, May 2, 2007

There have been moments when the only thing that has kept me in this marriage is my love for God, and my concern for my children...this idea that an angry father might be better than no father at all.... It would be frivolous to believe that the culmination of this struggle is nothing more than the fact that we are still together. There must be more, but for now, I am too tired to analyze.

On our 11th anniversary, Roger said the "d" word: divorce. I remember thinking I ought to fight for our marriage, but I had no fight left in me. Earlier in the day, over an anniversary lunch with Blaine in tow, Roger blew up because I'd interrupted him. Somehow this launched into a huge fight, by text, for several hours, over who was the abusive one.

After he calmed down, I realized that he would now have to fight for our marriage too. I was ready to give up, not for good, but at least long enough to get some sort of break from him. If we were to stay together, he would have to start taking some of the initiative to save us. After our argument, he opened the car door for me and hugged me. I just cried. I still loved him, but I felt like I could no longer trust him as I had before. I had grown weary of his behavior. It often seemed that he was using the PTSD as an excuse to do whatever he wanted, and I was simply exhausted by it all.

Journal, end of May 2007

Roger is taking somewhat of a guarded interest in our family again. I do not know how to handle this. So now the question is, how do I cope? How do I heal? And where do we go from here?

Roger was starting to spend more time at home and play with the boys more. We kept the playtime to short intervals, but for the first time in months, we could count on Roger's taking an interest, at least. He had made the decision to stay in the Army, and perhaps our argument had gone too far, since neither of us brought up the "d" word again.

Soon we'd be sent to San Antonio, where Roger would minister to the largest battalion in the Army. By this point, the war in Iraq had been the key point of his ministry of soldiers for almost four years. I was proud of him. At the same time, I felt the man I married had vanished. There were moments when I saw him again — when he continued to work despite his own brokenness, or when he took over the household for three days when my back seized up and was suddenly a tender, loving husband to me again. But as soon as he'd come

close, he'd withdraw. And after so many months of anger, it was surprisingly hard for me to just let it go.

Journal, late June 2007

I understand what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." It is difficult to hate someone when you are praying for them. When I would pray for Roger, I would be filled with a love and compassion for him that came from God, and was not of myself. I put my "self" aside — my selfishness, my grudges, my pain, and looked to the needs of another. I saw Roger as hurting too.... And in those moments, I loved him in a way I had not loved him for quite some time.

I tried to forgive, and Roger tried to change. He was opening doors for me, initiating intimacy, and helping with the boys. I should have been ecstatic. But what happened next was an utter surprise. I plunged into my own extreme depression. Now that Roger seemed to be returning to us, I crashed. For two weeks I could barely get out of bed. Washing the dishes was impossible — somehow the running water made my own waterworks well up. Same with taking a shower.

Then it got worse. Each morning I felt like I was going to suffocate, and when I sat up, I'd cry. I had no appetite. I lost 10 pounds in two weeks. I can't really say how Roger responded to all this because I was too depressed and, for the first time, I was wrapped up in my own grief, not his. But suddenly it was Roger holding down the fort.

The next several months were a blur, but I felt like God was pulling me up, slowly. Both Roger and I were gaining our footing. Everything felt like new territory. He had been asked to write a book about his experiences in Iraq and the spiritual crisis it provoked in him. While this took much of his time — and mine to help him — it was good for both of us that he wrote it down instead of keeping it bottled up inside.

Journal, August 25, 2008

Yesterday I had the opportunity to read Roger's book...it had a profound effect on me. I have never quite had an understanding of what Roger really went through in Iraq. I had never before realized the extent of combat that Roger saw. I did not know that he was out with the medics...seeing soldiers brought in who did not make it. I knew he'd identified some dead bodies, but I never knew he'd been involved in putting them in the black body bags.

Reading Roger's story, I was struck by the horrors of war. Looking at my own experience, I was also struck by how much horror could be brought home from the battlefield.

One night we had a long talk about what he had seen, and what his return home had been like for me. We sat facing each other on the couch, with my hand resting on his thigh. The more he shared, the closer we moved to each other until soon I was holding him. We both cried. I felt compassion for him on a level I had not felt since the day he broke down, a lifetime ago, months after we moved to Maryland.

We've both lost some of our perfectionism, and that has been a godsend. I had always wanted the white-picket-fence version of a family, and there had been little room in my girlhood fantasies for a troubled husband. Roger also was letting go of the notion of being a perfect chaplain and was realizing that it was possible to help others question, and therefore deepen, their spirituality the same way he was learning to.

We knew we needed more changes. After more than 15 years in the service, Roger left the Army to work as a civilian chaplain at a Dallas hospital. We'd be moving again, but this time we were moving forward, and away from the past. One night we watched a documentary about refining silver, and it made me think that each of us had to go through a kind of fire in order to come out refined. He had collapsed, and so had I, and somehow that shared experience was the one thing that allowed us to start rebuilding together.

To: Tracy Taylor Gelbaugh

From: Rebekah

Re: Prayer Partners

Date: October 16, 2008

I continually learn/remember that there is no "quick fix" to the PTSD. Roger is no longer boiling over at every moment of the day (not that he can't be provoked!)... We go to lunch a couple times a week, and have deep conversations. Sometimes we talk about how Roger is moving back toward his faith.

I am learning to see him as a new Roger. Not the man I married, and not the man from Maryland. He is a different person now, but he is reaching out. If I can join him...on his journey, I think our marriage will be stronger for it, and eventually we will be back on the same path. A very different path than I ever would have imagined, but we will be together, and we will be stronger for it.

After his second deployment to Iraq, where he pastored soldiers with severe injuries, near-death misses, and post-traumatic stress disorder, Roger Benimoff himself succumbed to PTSD and turned away from both his family and his faith. REDBOOK asked this former Army chaplain, who describes his painful personal and spiritual struggle in his new book, [Faith Under Fire](#), to talk about picking up the pieces of his marriage, his relationship with God, the demons that he still battles, and his hopes for the future.

Q: What made you hold on when you wanted to leave your marriage?

A: It's more than just a feeling of whether I'm in love or not; it's the covenant between me and Rebekah, much like the covenant between me and God. It was during those roughest times that I relearned how to love Bekah, especially with the changes — the emotional disconnect — occurring in me.

Q: At what point did you start feeling your faith come back — or has it not fully come back yet?

A: It's a work in progress — it's always developing, evolving. I'm always examining my theology, my beliefs, meshing the theory that I know with the practical experience I go through each day. It's a constant evolution.

Q: Was there a certain turning point?

A: It was when I realized I was totally at a loss and I needed God's grace more than I needed answers. During my last few months working at Walter Reed, a soldier who had routine surgery died in the recovery room. My chaplain supervisors saw how shaken I was by this and recommended that one of my chaplain peers take over. I realized the spiritual deficit, really the life deficit I was in, and I cried out to God and just said, "Help me."

Q: How did it feel to learn more about how your struggles affected Bekah?

A: It made me sad. Sometimes she probably thought that I was making excuses for my behavior, when it's really not a choice. Knowing she couldn't fully understand what I was going through but having her living with the symptoms — it's distressing. It was something that I didn't have control over.


Q: What are you looking forward to doing as a family?

A: I'm looking forward to being able to be more comfortable around Bekah and the kids. It's still very difficult at times to be present emotionally and physically — a lot of times I can only take a certain amount of time or stimuli before I need to take a break, to go to the garage and tinker, or to go to Starbucks.

Q: If you had it all to do again, would you still have become an Army chaplain?

A: Absolutely. I'm very proud of being able to serve soldiers, especially in a combat environment. I wouldn't hesitate to do it again. I feel like I've made a lifelong contribution no one can take away: a significant contribution not only to the nation but to God.

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