

Third Place NonFiction

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by Ellen Myer

General Muammar Gaddafi died today. My sister called to give me what she thought would be welcome news. My feelings were so mixed, I was not sure what they were. To be glad that a despot who personally threatened my family was finally stopped forever would be natural. To cry with joy that he could never threaten or harm anyone again makes sense. I did cry, but they were quiet and sad tears. I wasn't sure why. At one time I wanted him dead, waited to hear that our air strike had killed him, wanted to know my children were safe from his harm forever. But I felt no joy in his demise. Instead, it seemed like the end of a long and sad story.

We were stationed in Berlin, Germany when Ghadafy bombed the LaBelle Disco, which he targeted specifically as a place known to be popular among Afro-American soldiers. He later stated it was to be sure he killed Americans. He was successful in that two soldiers died horribly, in pain. Seventy-nine soldiers were among the 230 people who were injured, leaving everyone in that disco physically or psychologically maimed. At 1:40 a.m., on April 5, 1986, our own nightmare began.

We woke to miles of fencing that surrounded all Army facilities, proving the Army has plans and can do almost anything literally overnight. Suddenly, we became the targets, and we were very easy to find. Our housing was not enclosed with the military installations. It was instead patrolled by guards; all soldiers in turn, protecting us by night and day. Not yet knowing what had happened, I walked my children to the school bus stop as usual, but it was to see an open jeep with a soldier holding an M-50 machine gun in place while one behind him held the clip. If the bus was attacked, the perpetrator would be killed. Our children were to be avenged, not protected.

On American Forces Network television, instructions were given to stay home if possible. If we had to leave, we were to use Army or German buses. Privately owned vehicles with large, white USA stickers were targets. Scouting activities were cancelled. The post theater was closed. I received a call that the Childbirth classes I taught for the American Red Cross at the Army hospital were cancelled until further notice. Everything stopped. Except school. To show strength and unity, our children were to be on those buses and in class. There was no question of doing otherwise. Detachment is the way of

military families everywhere. Refusing to follow means affecting the soldier's career. And to a soldier, it is more than a career. It is a calling that justifies anything the family has to go through as well.

Today, I called my oldest daughter, Amy, who had been fourteen at the time. She said they didn't fully realize any danger. It was like a new game. They baked cookies for the "cute" young soldiers and threw them into the jeep. The young men never wavered or looked away from the bus, but stayed in place, in duty. My son and his friends jauntily wore their father's cap with Army insignia, boarding the bus with bravado and saluting the guard on board. Fathers were either at work or patrolling in the frigid open jeeps. We mothers walked them to the bus stop and waited for them when they came home, too terrified to wonder aloud if there was a bomb somewhere that had not been found- at school, on the bus, near our homes, in that parked car. Life went on precariously. School held a PTA meeting to vote on whether our children would be given dog tags so their bodies could be identified if- The powers that be were confident that Gaddafi had seen that we would not back down.

Rumors abounded. My husband told me later that bombs were found in the theater, scout hut, and hospital. Not a single explosive had placed in an unprotected military building. He wanted to target women and children instead of soldiers trained to fight back. They were the actions of a bully and a coward. He continued as a threat until President Reagan bombed Libya. Gaddafi backed down and became quiet. We breathed a sigh of relief, but since we had no idea what had caused the bombing, and what was being done behind the scenes for us, we continued to live in fear. We took the either the Army or city bus, leaving our vehicles at home. When we went out, we wore German clothing and did not speak aloud in English.

Assurances that he would not hurt us and the school buses would no longer be armed were met with whispers among ourselves, "He'll be back. He'll get stronger and he'll be back." And twenty-five years later, he was. I turned on my television set to see him addressing the United Nations. I was transported instantly back to that horror, with a snapshot in my mind of young frozen soldiers, aimed to fire, and my husband coming home in the frigid, early hours to rest, only to put on his uniform for the day. I wondered numbly why this monster was welcomed into our country, to be heard by the ambassadors of the world.

A couple of weeks after the bombing occurred, I was with a sick child, in an endless wait at the Army hospital ER. A young soldier in uniform, really just a girl, turned to me with blank eyes. "Were you there?" she asked. I shook my head, unsure how to answer. She went on, to anyone or no one, feeling the need to speak whether or not anyone around her cared.

“We laid there in the dark for what seemed like hours. I laid there, unable to move, hearing people scream.” She looked back at me then. “That poor soldier died. It blew his legs off and he was burned, and he kept screaming. Everyone was screaming, and no one could do anything but lay there, and wait. I want to go home. They say I’ll be able to go back to work, that I wasn’t hurt that bad.” She looked down at her immobilized leg, her arm was bandaged and her face scratched and bruised. “I just want to go home.”

I longed to put my arms around her, but was afraid I would hurt her.

“I keep the light on. I can’t sleep. Every sound terrifies me. I’m no good to them now. Why won’t they let me just go home?”

“When her name was called, she got up slowly. I helped her with her crutches and watched her unwieldy movements to the examining room. I held my daughter a little closer as she laid across the my lap and slept feverishly.

“None of us sleep now,” I thought. “Why won’t they let all of us go home?”

I asked my Amy how she felt. Today. Then. Thirty-nine years old, while soothing a crying baby of her own, she told me of her own mixed feelings. “We weren’t ever really afraid. You did a good job of hiding your fear from us. It’s horrible to celebrate such a cruel death for another human being. That the world has to be a place where we are happy to see someone die. Will there be peace for Libya, or will someone tyrannical take his place?” Neither of us spoke for several moment, then she said, barely above a whisper, “I can’t imagine putting my children in such danger.”

I knew the answer to the question she hadn’t asked: why hadn’t we left anyway? Because we were as paralyzed by the Army as we were by the enemy.

Before I get out of bed each morning, and before I go to sleep at night, I pray for my children’s safety. Without thinking too deeply, my spirit is thankful for another safe day, afraid that if I miss a prayer, a word, even a thought, that I might lose them. They are adults with children of their own, and I hope they aren’t left with this same sick, vague fear. Mine started the day I placed them on the bus and, though we came back to the relative safety of the United States, it followed me back home and has never left.

Today, on October 20th, 2011, I wonder how the other families are faring. We returned dazed and amazed to find out few knew or cared about what we had been through. We were friends then in a common crisis. Now we are spread thinly across the States, back to the lives we had left in order to

serve our country. I've tried to find them on face book without luck. I wish we could share in this now as we did then, and reclaim what was taken from us forever.