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First Place

"Excerpt from the Book of Short Stories *Le er In Time*: "In a Time of War"

by

Erika Young

Captain James McDonough,

If you're reading this, I'm dead. So you don't have to worry. When you've nished, all I ask is that you consider what I've said.

I was never made for war. Stateside, I did well in school. *I had the makings of a ne English teacher*, people would say. When the draft went out I cried over my letter while my classmates celebrated and kissed their girls. I wasn't made for war. My dad made that very clear. *Too soft*, he'd say. And I knew it was true, I did. My mom believed in me, though. *Fight bravely*, she'd said, *and I'll see you soon*. I remember sticking my head from the window of the train watching them disappear behind me. Mom stood with a raised gloved hand, a tear in her eye and a handkerchief at her nose. Dad stood stoic, but by the perk of his shoulders some part of him, small, deep, yet present, was proud. I blinked their image into safekeeping, a small memory of the little life I was leaving behind.

ey say fear is in a man's eyes. is is true, but for me fear was everywhere. It was in my eyes, ears, arms, legs, the dirt beneath my ngernails, the muck beneath my boots. I was constantly being yelled at for not straightening my back or clumsily holding my weapon. As if I wanted to hold it.

Being called to service is supposed to make men from boys. We're supposed to come home stronger, prouder and ready to face any challenge with the valor and grace of storybook heroes. I've seen battles transform people, alright. But there are no fairytales under the layer of death and dirt and guilt and gunpowder and hate and hope and fear and re and relief and rain and God knows what else. e boys who went to war are no longer themselves, but changed into something entirely di erent. ose boys lay dead, scattered in the dust of the frontlines. e men, or rather the shadows and shells of men, who return somehow have to take their place.

ere's no nobler a cause than for a man to lay down his life for his country, someone said. I don't know if that's true. e longer I'm here the more I realize that there is nothing noble about this place. Or maybe I've been here too long; I just have lost sight of it. Maybe you can tell me where it is. Is it in the eyes of a dying soldier, arms and legs crushed, bleeding like the rushing river? Is it in the rain that washes his blood away, preparing the soil for the next lost soul? Or is it in the screams of a town being burned to the ground? I think it's the idea of war that people love so much, an ancient warped idea that we're all out here to literally lie down on the battle eld and use our nal breaths to bless the country we fought for. Idiots, all of them.

clutching the small living memories of him that she would have to now raise alone, his eldest son growing up wanting revenge, only to go to war and have his blood fall the same as his father before him. And in my head I was trapped along with it. at silent place I went to… I didn't think I would ever come back from.

Until you sat down beside me.

Just another soldier the captain's talking down from a ledge, I heard a man say.

is is war, you said, *it's young men dying and old men talking. Sometimes you have to take a life, to give life. ink of a kid back home. ink how one man dying puts us one step closer to winning this war and puts that kid one step closer to not having to join us out here in this hell hole. War is death, son. You just have to believe in something. Put your faith in something. Fight for something. It doesn't have to be the cause that the "old men" say we're here for; I know mine sure as hell isn't. But if you're not running towards something soldier, you're standing still. And out here standing still gets you killed.*

ey brought you here, now it's your job to get yourself back. You have to work every day to get yourself back. You can get yourself back.

You brought me back to our tortured reality with a new, growing hope that I might be able to survive it, to survive this God-forsaken war. You led me away from the place in my mind where I was su ocating in my own sorrows and fears and gave me a goal. Part of me thinks you said that stu just to make me better. Part of me doesn't care. I play back what you said word for word in my head every night before I sleep as I wipe away the scum of the day.

When I got the letter that my parents had died you came looking for me. You found me at the river. You placed a hand on my shoulder. *We're moving on soldier, fall back in line,* you said. And for the rst time since I had left my home, since waving goodbye to my parents on the train, since being yelled at to stand up straight, since shooting a man in the chest and feeling my own rip apart in repentance, I cried. I cried for the man I'd killed; I cried for my family; I cried for you, for me, for our allies, for our enemies, for our country, for the women and children back home waiting for men that would never come, for that kid who I saved from coming here to die. I cried until my tears lled the river and I felt too weak to stand. And you let me cry. You never let go of my shoulder. It started to rain. Do you remember that? It started to rain and I looked up, letting the rain wash the tears from my face. I couldn't feel anything anymore in that rain: no pain, no anger, just your rm, gentle hand on my shoulder.

e fear doesn't bother me too much anymore. Instead of praying for a swift end, I'm praying to win the next battle. I'm stronger, Captain. I feel like you'll be proud to know that.

We moved on, and the battles were few and far between. I started to hope. Hope for home, though not much of one exists for me anymore. Hope for peace. Hell, I hoped for ice cream.

And then the shots returned once again. One shot, one little insigni cant shot, barely heard, hardly noticed, kissed the end of a breeze. I surely should have died on the spot from the immediate crying out of my senses… at was the shot that struck you.