

REBECCA KANNER

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## Safety

When my brother has massed into a flesh-colored Incredible Hulk, it's time to starve. He doesn't eat carbohydrates and he restricts his water. I know how it works because this will be his second competition—he won the lightweight division at his first. He wants to win this next one as a middleweight.

His Myspace status reads: "Aaron plans to respectfully destroy all of his fellow competitors."

I'm not alarmed when I see him at Lifetime Fitness, where he works as a personal trainer, and he says it's nice to see me—all three of me that are shimmering in front of him. I'm not sure if he's hallucinating or he just doesn't have the energy to focus his gaze. He looks strong, invincible, but he can no longer do the planche push-ups he's put into his routine, and his backflip has been giving him trouble.

He's 5' 6" and 180 pounds, which makes him, technically, obese. He has to be under 176 to compete as a middleweight, and he'll have no trouble making it—he's not starving to make weight. He's starving so the veins bulge from his skin like little green rivers. He's starving so his muscles look like they might explode.

Later, when he comes home, he's so exhausted that he has to turn his routine song up as loud as it will go not only because he left a good deal of his hearing in Iraq, but to motivate himself to practice.

Let the bodies hit the floor  
Let the bodies hit the floor  
Beaten, why for

Can't take much more  
*Here we go here we go here we go, now...<sup>1</sup>*

It's the song that PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) blasted over Fallujah when my brother's unit invaded on November 7, 2004, in what the American military named: *Operation Phantom Fury*. The song was used not just to terrorize the insurgents who hadn't heeded the flyers dropped from the sky warning them to leave if they were to avoid a battle, but also to drown out the Marines' fear.

The insurgency had its own anesthetic. My brother said of the men he fought, "They were hopped up on something. They had no fear and they didn't die right away when you shot them."

This battle turned out to be the bloodiest in the Iraq war to date. A third of the men in my brother's unit were injured or killed, officially making his unit "Combat Ineffective." Nine of the 160 men in my brother's company lost their lives.

He finished his four years of active duty in October of 2006. When he first returned to the home in St. Paul where he, my father and I live, he warmly greeted all the people we'd invited to welcome him home—a mix of my father's friends, my friends, and my brother's friends—about twenty people. My father had the American and Marine flags flying outside, and the red, white and blue streamers we'd decorated the living room with for his first visit home from the Marines three and a half years earlier were still hanging limply in the living room.

He ate the pies people had brought for him, and politely answered questions about how hot Iraq is (very, though it's cold at night in the winter), where he'd been on his 3 tours (Diwaniyah, Fallujah, Ramadi), what he missed most while he was gone: ("*Sleep!*")

As the guests left my brother graciously thanked each of them for coming. Then he went down to the basement, turned the television on, and watched it, alone in the dark, for six weeks.

Not wanting to descend into our dank, dust-filled basement, and not yet realizing my brother couldn't hear well anymore, I'd yell down to him to ask how he was doing. When he didn't answer I assumed he wanted to be left alone, but sometimes that didn't stop me. I crept down the stairs without turning on a light—I didn't want to annoy him and the television projected enough light to see by. Also, I didn't want to be reminded of the old bubbling floor tile and cobwebs full of dry, half-disappeared insects. I came to stand beside where he was lying on the couch and gently asked him what he was watching. Occasionally I'd pull up

a folding chair and watch with him. We breathed the dust in together, watching colors flicker across the screen. I imagine the scene—with him lying down and me sitting beside him—looked like a hospital visitation, except that I was turned away, towards the television. We didn't talk about the war, or really, much of anything.

Then one day, as I stood at the top of the stairs deciding if I should go down or not, I heard the clanking of metal. A weight machine had been sitting in the basement since before my brother left for the Marines, and I realized he was using it. For a few moments I stood happily listening to the rhythmic squeaking and clanging of metal blocks being lifted and then falling gently down upon each other. I thought: *Maybe everything will be okay.*

My brother started to work out everyday, and soon after he decided to get a membership at Lifetime.

He began to get bigger, and—seemingly in direct proportion—happier.

Though the money he lost in unemployment would be many times greater than what he made, I was relieved when he got a part-time job cleaning the fitness equipment at Lifetime, wandering around the gym dressed all in black, smelling of disinfectant and looking much more alive than he had in our basement. Half a year later he began studying to become a personal trainer. He stopped watching so much television and made friends with the people at the gym who shared his obsession with weight-lifting.

I don't know if winning his upcoming middleweight competition will help him finally feel fearless and strong. But I'm hopeful—being hopeful is the least I can do for him.

When he was a baby, I tried to make my brother safe the way my father had taught me.

As a body-builder he eats chicken, salmon and protein shakes, but as a peaceful, runty baby he liked to eat plants. His fuzzy baby-gaze sharpened when he spotted a big shiny leaf poking out of one of the potted plants in our living room, and he rushed across the carpet in his walker, ecstatically waving his arms because he couldn't *believe* his luck!

I knew what I had to do when his tiny hand reached for the leaf.

My hands were twice as big as his. I was—am—five years older. I easily grabbed his little hand in one of my own, and hit it. If he'd been old enough to understand I'd have told him: *You shouldn't reach for things, you shouldn't tug, you shouldn't pull things apart, you shouldn't put strange things in your mouth.* Above all he shouldn't have messed with my father's plants.

How my father loved—and still loves—his plants! He also loves birds, trees, little bugs which we looked at and sometimes kept in jars. He and I once studied a broken egg under the microscope. We marveled at a tiny foot that seemed to be the only part of the chick that had had a chance to form before the egg fell from the nest. My father handled the egg like it still might come to life. He was careful not to damage it.

But us—my brother and I—he grabbed and twisted like he didn't remember being young and already having feeling in his arms and legs. I thought he knew everything and possessed the best solution to any problem. When I cut or bruised myself I felt I had no choice but to hold the problem out to him—my hand, my elbow, my ankle. He grabbed the limb, twisted it so he could examine it, and then painted it red with Mercurochrome.<sup>2</sup> The Mercurochrome drew attention to the wound and therefore also to my klutziness. I wanted to wash it off but I was afraid of what might happen if I did, and how it might hurt. I knew I was wrong to hurt, and I would have been all the more wrong to show it.

My brother quickly came to feel this way too, and he does not seem to know—not anymore—when he's hurt.

At the end of 2002 my father and I went to Camp Pendleton, California to see my brother graduate from Marine Boot Camp. It was a clear hot day—the temperature difference between St. Paul and San Diego was about 70 degrees, and I felt very pale amongst the other onlookers, at least a third of whom were Latino.

My brother had told us that he'd had some trouble with his left knee, but that everything was fine. He wasn't hard to spot. Hundreds of guys in uniform were in formation on the field, but he was the only one in uniform on the bleachers, his crutches leaning at a steep angle beside him. He'd confessed to me that he wouldn't mind not being in formation—that in fact he couldn't *stand* formation (ha ha!), and many others literally couldn't either: "Sometimes guys get dehydrated, or their knees lock, and they pass the fuck out." Still, he didn't look happy sitting on the sidelines all by himself. He'd been on crutches a couple of times before (due to rollerblading and gymnastics accidents) and afterwards he hadn't wanted his crutches anywhere that he could see them.

After the formation ceremony and speeches, the graduates and their families were provided lunch, which we ate in a shelter on base. We mingled a little. Usually in mingling situations I will either babble at great length to avoid the risk of an awkward pause (while carefully scanning the people around me to make sure they aren't exchanging glances or rolling their eyes), or simply nod and smile. By this

time I was a graduate student and anything free was of special interest to me, so I just chewed and smiled and thanked the many people who told me how tough and loyal my brother was.

When my brother went to get more food, one of his Staff Sergeants recounted for me how he'd tried to keep his injury hidden, even loaded down with a 50 pound pack during a 9.7 mile hike that ended with a climb up The Reaper, a 700 foot tall mountain. "It wasn't like him to be the last one. It finally became apparent that he was limping. His knee was swollen to the size of a cantaloupe," the Staff Sergeant laughed. "He almost lost it."

I tried not to look like I might regurgitate my free lunch. Later my brother would tell me that this same Staff Sergeant saw him heading back to his "rack" after breakfast one day, and my brother didn't say "Good morning," loud enough, so the Staff Sergeant made him do IT (Individual Training). My brother did mountain-climbers for 2 minutes. He tells me this in the same tone as the Staff Sergeant told me about his knee—like it's hilarious, and I try not to show any emotion, though I'm thinking *Why the hell didn't you remind him your knee was about to explode?* With my brother it's best not to act like anything is a big deal.

But when the Staff Sergeant told me my brother almost lost his knee I refused to pretend it was nothing. "How is your knee?" I asked Aaron after lunch. I'd asked him earlier that day, when I first saw him, but this time I asked him without any pretense of casualness.

"It feels okay," he said dismissively. "I'm taking stuff and it's helping."

Later he showed me the knee—swollen unevenly, like our bubbling basement tile. Pink and red and white and angry. And also sad—something about its unevenness reminding me of a heart, and clearly, from the look of it, a bruised-until-broken heart, which has traveled down the length of the body, or has maybe even been dropped, and due to neglect is pressing outwards, trying to escape. Unable to escape, it was rubbing hard against my brother's bones, as if to say, "I will bring myself to your attention. I will make a place for myself where you can't ignore me. I hurt and now you will hurt too."

I began to worry in earnest about his upcoming tour to Iraq. What if he got hurt—would he tell anybody? Would he even know that he was hurt? What had happened to his ability to cry out when he was in pain?

At one year of age, when I grabbed his hand, he knew that it hurt. I spanked his smooth new skin like I could slap the urge to grab from it, and he did something he lost the ability to do in the Marines: he cried.

I'd felt sad that he was crying, and angry that he'd made me hit him, and more than anything, angry that he'd been on the verge of eating the plant. *He had to learn the rules of the world so he wouldn't be hurt.* I wasn't always going to be there to protect him.

My father was, unofficially, a behaviorist. He had to take care of me the year after I was born, when my mother was hospitalized for psychiatric problems and chemical dependency. If he heard me crying in my crib he knew that he must not come to me, or I would learn that crying is a behavior that is rewarded. My mother told me that when she came home he wouldn't let her come to me either, and recently my father acknowledged it was true. His face looked heavy as he admitted this, as if he were remembering a terrible time. Now I think of the heaviness of his face whenever I feel too ready to blame him for everything.

By the time Aaron was born I'd become a behaviorist too. The slaps I gave him weren't always to his hands, and they weren't always physical. I used words like *stupid*, phrases like *how could you*. I wanted to make sure that he would *never again* do whatever it was that he'd done wrong. If he never did anything wrong, nothing bad would happen to him. My father had taught me, and his teaching method had made it true: one false move and the world will come down on you.

My father wasn't one to be argued with. And yet he and I yelled at each other across tables, through all the rooms of our house, inside the car, out on the lawn, until we were hoarse. I learned to stomp my foot, pound my fist on the table, yell so loudly I couldn't hear him yelling back. He told me to shut up, that he would slap me. Though I was scared—in fact because I was scared and knew I should hide it—I kept yelling.

Aaron rarely argued aloud with anyone.

Yet I suspect he was always striving to best my father—to be as strong, as fearless, as fearsome—and he finally did by joining the Marines. He told me, “I want to show the world that I can do anything.”

By “world,” did he mean “father?”

My father and brother have wrestled since my brother could walk. Even now they wrestle—one attacks the other and they bang into counters & chairs in their mock battle. Though it's not supposed to be a real fight, can't each feel the strength in the other's body, feel how easy or hard it is to lead the battle in the direction of his opponent—to make him step back, or to be unable to do anything but step back himself? Now, unlike in their wrestling matches before Aaron went into the Marines, my father is very careful not to lose control and escalate the mock battles.

He wraps his arms protectively around himself, and calls jestfully for me to come help him: “Help! Bec, help! He’s beating me up!”

My father is such a loyal person that it’s hard to find out anything that doesn’t shine a good light on his mother and father, Jewish immigrants who came from Poland and Austria in 1919 and 1929 respectively. They lived in New York—first in Brownsville, and then in a little apartment on Coney Island from which you can see the ocean (and just as importantly to me years later when my father took me to visit my grandparents, the Sliding Ferris Wheel) and hear the screams of the kids on the Cyclone. My grandfather worked at a ladies’ handbag factory and my grandmother worked at an umbrella factory and then as a subway token seller.

“They were liberal people” my father tells me, “until the ends of their lives.” They’d worked hard in order to feed and clothe my father and his two sisters, and they resented people who expected the government to take care of them. By the time I came along they’d started listening to conservative radio programs and yelling at the guests on talk shows. Or at least I remember my grandma doing that. I also remember her doing everything for my grandfather. He didn’t even pour the milk on his own cereal. My grandparents were like my father, and I suppose like me—a combination of very loving and very angry. My grandmother more loving than my grandfather, certainly, and not quite as angry.

I know my grandfather hit my father. My father doesn’t want to talk about it, but when I see him getting frustrated with himself, a depth of sudden fear and anger triggered by something as small or smaller than spilled milk, I know there’s an invisible person standing over him, yelling things only he can hear, “How could you pour too much milk? Look at all that’s wasted!”

Except that I hear these things too.

My father has passed his ghosts onto my brother and I, and I have doubled Aaron’s share. He doesn’t blame me. Deep down he must think that my father and I slapped his hands and were critical of him because he deserved it.

During his second and third tours, when it had been too long since his last staticy 4 am call and I’d started to imagine the worst, I asked myself: *Did my slaps send him to Iraq?*

The strain of the 14-week diet leading up to the competition is making my brother very intense—more intense than before the last competition. One of his trainers has noticed, and he’s assured him that it’s natural for the stress of training to bring him back to the last time he was under intense stress, which was when he was on his third tour in Iraq.

The stress has finally got my brother talking.

He tells me, one night when raccoons run back and forth across the roof and we think we hear them in the fireplace, of the huge mutant dogs at Camp Habbaniyah. They had strange bumps on their backs, and there was a rumor they'd killed a guy. Everyone had to carry their weapon with them at all times.

And then he confesses to me—as if he's confessing a horrible crime—that as a machine gunner in Iraq sometimes he'd been afraid. "Sometimes I felt like a scared dog running around with its tail between its legs."

"Of course you were scared, lots of men in your unit died. You had good reason to be scared."

"No, I wasn't scared then, during Operation Phantom Fury. Then—at the time—I was numb, and I didn't hardly even feel anything when those guys died. I wasn't scared until my third tour, when we convoyed back and forth through the Anbar Province on 'I.E.D. Alley.' We were told to go slow, that that would be the best way to avoid the I.E.D.s. But we figured if we were going slow the insurgents watching with their fingers on the button could time the explosions better, so we drove erratically—sometimes fast, sometimes slow. The main thing was just to keep moving.

"Bullets hit my turret, and a few times we came within inches of a pressure plate (bomb), but nobody died. For awhile nothing that bad happened, and *that's* when I was most afraid—I was sure something bad *bad* to happen. I thought that at any second—sometimes at every second for days in a row—the road would explode. But then, the few times when I was actually sure I was about to die, I was completely calm."

He's sitting in his spot on the floor in my room, looking down at the weightlifting calluses on his hands. He's been sitting there so often that there's a grey imprint of his back on the white wall. "That's what I'm always like now—numb. I'm not afraid anymore. I can't feel anything unless I'm angry."

He tells me, one night when he's sitting on my floor late at night, not wanting to go to bed, "I dream Iraqis have invaded our country."

I wonder if that is the dream he is having when I wake up later in the night and stumble across the hall, woozy from sleeping pills, into the bathroom. I hear him tossing with all his might from one side to the other, and back. He is still tossing when I stumble back across the hall, into my bedroom, and close the door.

For a moment I think I should wake him—I want to rescue him.

Nineteen years ago, after we moved into the house we live in now, he developed a fear of the dark. He was seven, and absolutely sure that there were monsters in his



closet and under the bed. “Don’t worry,” I told him, “I have just the thing.” I knew he would believe in whatever magic I came up with. And as I walked a bowl of “Angel Water” into his room, holding it carefully out in front of me in both hands, I believed in my magic powers too. I placed the bowl of water on his dresser, then said a blessing in Hebrew which was identical to the one observant Jews say before eating, but with some gibberish tacked onto the end. Though perhaps “gibberish” isn’t the right word for the sounds that left my mouth, which felt as if they were from the very core of my being, and were laced with a desire to keep him safe that was so incredibly strong and full of energy that surely it would protect him from whatever might come his way.

He left the bowl on his dresser, and whenever he got scared that it was losing its power I would bring him some new Angel Water.

But now, as he smashes around in the dark dreaming of an Iraqi invasion, he’s not the only one who’s afraid. I am afraid too. What can I say to rescue him? And if I touch him, how long will it take for him to realize it’s only me?

My father and I are increasingly careful around him. We no longer suggest he go to the VA for an assessment and counseling; we don’t talk about foods that aren’t allowed on his body-building diet; and we’re vigilant about not mentioning the controversy surrounding the treatment of detainees (“What about *us!*!?!?” my brother will ask. “We didn’t get to sleep for days at a time, we didn’t have the right armor until our 3<sup>rd</sup> tour, five of our guys were killed because the army just up and left a secured area 5 hours before we arrived ...”).

The more he tells me, the more I understand why he usually only wants to talk about body-building. He’s quick to remind me and anyone else who cares to listen that it could be worse: “Some people come back from Iraq and drink too much or beat their wives. I lift weights.”

Then, displaying the hyper-confidence Arnold Schwarzenegger made famous in the movie “Pumping Iron” when he told a competitor before the show that he’d *already* called his mother to tell her he won, my brother adds, “And win titles!”

I help him prepare. I paint him dark, I clap when he poses in front of the bathroom mirror, I tell him he looks like he could uproot trees and toss them half-way down the block. I’m understanding when he gets Pro-Tan on the bathroom towels and toilet seat, and I don’t say anything when he makes a mess cooking massive amounts of chicken and doesn’t clean it up. He had to eat even more for this competition—he’ll be 20 pounds heavier at this show than his first. I pretend

not to notice that it smells like a barn full of chickens has bled, shit, and burned to death in our kitchen.

And then finally—June 7, 2008—he is on stage. He’s been home for over a year and a half, and finally he’s going to feel good. Finally he’s going to be proud. I start screaming.

You’re Perfect!

Beautiful!

It’s yours—Go get it! All yours!

Bring it home!

Get Some!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

No matter how loud I yell I can’t get all the emotion out. I’m yelling at the top of my lungs not only because he doesn’t hear well but because I feel like I might explode. Beneath what I’m screaming aloud is what I’m actually screaming: *You’re damaged and brave and bleeding from the wounds we gave you which you’ve made beautiful, and everyone is cheering because they are large, and in perfect proportion to each other, and flexed so that they are shining through your skin like something Godly.*

His planche push-ups are perfect. His flip is perfect. His muscles pop and he can’t help smiling when he hears me and his friends from Lifetime cheering for him. There are ten other middleweights but they don’t stand a chance against all he has to prove.

“I want to be bigger next time,” he tells me afterwards.

He eats and eats. He has gained 25 pounds in the week since the competition. When we get home from The Grand Buffet he runs upstairs to weigh himself. He waits until my father and I gather around to step on the scale: 202 pounds.

“Do you need to get much bigger?” my father asks.

“Yes,” my brother says.

## Notes

1. Drowning Pool, “Bodies” *Sinner*, 2001.

2. Mercurochrome is a **topical antiseptic**. It’s distribution in the US was halted in 1998 because of The Food and Drug Administration’s concerns about potential mercury poisoning

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**REBECCA KANNER** is working on a book about her brother's obsession with body-building since his return from serving in Iraq. She is the winner of a 2003 Associated Writing Programs Award and the recipient of a Carrie S. Galt Prize. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, and *Third Coast*.

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**AARON KANNER** won the 2009 Minnesota Gopher State Body-building Championship on June 6, qualifying him to compete at a national level. He placed 14<sup>th</sup> in the middleweight division at nationals on June 20, 2009. He plans to spend the year adding muscle so he can compete next year at nationals as a light-heavy.







