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A Mothers' War

By CYNTHIA GORNEY

They were talking about military burial benefits as the waitress took the salad plates away, and one of them had come up with something perversely humorous even on this subject, so they had been laughing. Now there was a brief, comfortable silence. They had one of the back rooms at Boone Tavern in downtown Columbia, Mo., where they usually go. It was a Friday night in February, and because one woman had other plans, there were only five of them, which made the big, round table seem too large. Instead of spacing themselves around it, they had taken seats along one side, closer to one another.

Patricia said, "I had a doorbell moment this week."

Tracy Della Vecchia looked up quickly and watched Patricia's face. Tracy's son had gone to high school with Patricia's son, so Tracy and Patricia knew of each other during the years when all the teenagers would hole up drinking beer in the barn on Tracy's property. But now their sons were 22 and in the same Marine unit in Iraq, and Tracy knows things about Patricia that she has never known about another person before. Tracy knows that clipped to Patricia's refrigerator is a list of things to remember in case the telephone rings in the middle of the night and it's Patricia's son calling from a camp somewhere just to talk. Tracy knows that the grandfather clock in Patricia's house chimes nine times when the other clocks say it's noon because the grandfather clock is set to Baghdad time. Tracy knows that Patricia has figured out how to tell if someone is in her driveway by squinting at the reflection off a certain glass-covered picture in the dining room, so that if it should ever be two men in uniform, Patricia will know they have arrived before they start ringing the bell and before she is obliged to look directly at them and hear what they have come to say.

"It was last night," said Patricia, who asked that her last name not be used. "Around 8 p.m. I was home by myself. I was not expecting the doorbell."

Patricia said she finally saw that it was an older gentleman, alone. "Probably canvassing for leukemia or something," she said. She said she never did open the door for him, and the other women said, no, of course not, and Tracy told the story about the blue car at dawn. She was telling it for my benefit; the others nodded as she spoke, like church women hearing a familiar passage of Scripture. "This was Derrick's first deployment, 2003, right after the war started," Tracy said. "I was a basket case. Five-thirty in the morning, I'm not sleeping anyway, I go downstairs and make coffee. You've seen my house -- nobody ever comes down my driveway. But a car comes down my driveway. A Lincoln Town Car."

"Crown Victoria," Sharon Curry said.

"Sorry," Tracy said. "A dark blue Crown Vic. Thank you, Sharon. And it's got these little antennas. And I'm sure someone's coming to tell me my son has died. I'm sure of it. And I literally fall down on my knees. I'm saying to myself, You've got to answer the door, you've got to answer the door. I'm yelling for my husband, but nothing's coming out of my mouth. I'm crawling toward the door. The car turns around the driveway circle. It stops for a minute. I think: O.K. He's going to get out. He's going to come tell me now. And -- he drives away. I come busting out the door. 'Wait! Wait!' But he didn't. So I call 911: 'There's somebody at my door! My son's in Iraq!' Turns out it's the fire district. There was smoke coming from someplace. They were going up and down driveways trying to find out where it was from."

Tracy has a wide, beautiful face, with pale skin and thick black hair that curls down her back, and her expression was

complicated, at once anguished and amused, in a way I was beginning to recognize. She lives and works on 15 acres outside town in a two-story house, where she runs a Web site called marineparents.com, which she built after she understood that her 19-year-old son, who enlisted two years earlier in the Marines, was going to be sent to war. The Web site has sprouted message boards, chat rooms and multiple layers of explanatory information, turning it into a national gathering place for adults whose sole connection is their role as parents of marines. Tracy tries to devote part of each day to her Web-design business, but most of her waking hours are now spent attending to marineparents.com, hunched in a silent office before a computer in which pride and grief and bewilderment and rage seem to be crashing around all the time, so that sometimes Tracy just pushes back from the desk and walks outside to smoke a cigarette and look at her pond. She signs her e-mail messages "semper fi." She is 43 and once thought she would become a hippie. When her son was small and received toy guns as presents, she threw them into the trash.

That son, Derrick Jensen, has spent three birthdays in a row deployed in Iraq. There are about 140,000 American troops stationed in Iraq; 23,000 of them are marines. As this article appears, Corporal Jensen should be somewhere near Falluja. He is an infantry radio operator, which sounded to Tracy like a good, safe job until she found out that radio operators carry big antennas, which make them easier targets. She let me stay at her house for a while this winter partly because I am a reporter and happen to have a 22-year-old son who is not in the military. Tracy thought people like me might want to know something about what it's like to live all the time with that kind of information about your child, to go to sleep knowing it and wake up knowing it and drive around town knowing it, which makes it possible to be standing in the Wal-Mart dog-food aisle on an ordinary afternoon and without reason or warning be knocked breathless again by the sudden imagining of sniper fire or an explosion beneath a Humvee. Still. Derrick has been shipped home twice since President Bush delivered his May 2003 speech in front of the "Mission Accomplished" banner on the deck of an aircraft carrier, and shipped back twice. He has had one occasion of near death that Tracy knows about in some detail; there are others, she assumes, that Derrick has so far kept to himself. "During the first deployment," Tracy said to me once as we were sitting in her car, a lipstick-red PT Cruiser with a yellow "Keep My Son Safe" ribbon magnet on the back, "the only emotion I could imagine him having was fear."

Tracy's closest friends in the world right now are other parents whose sons and daughters have served in Iraq or are serving there now. Some of these parents think the war is righteous, some think it was wrongheaded from the outset and some, like Tracy, have made fierce internal bargains with themselves about what they will and will not think about as long as their children and their children's comrades remain in uniform and in harm's way. The women Tracy meets every week for dinner, each of whom has a son in the Marines or the Army, have a "no politics" rule around their table; this was one of two things I remember Tracy telling me the first time she took me to a gathering of the mothers. The other thing was that draped over a banister in Tracy's house was an unwashed T-shirt Derrick had dropped during his last visit home. I thought Tracy was apologizing for her housekeeping, which I had already seen was much better than mine, but she cleared her throat and said that what I needed to understand was that she hadn't washed the T-shirt because if the Marine Corps has to send you your deceased child's personal effects, it launders the clothing first. "That means there's no smell," Tracy said.

She let this hover between us for a minute. "I've heard from so many parents who were crushed when they opened that bag, because they had thought they'd be able to smell their son," Tracy said.

One morning in February, Tracy got up at 4:30, made coffee, filled a commuter mug and climbed into her car with a suitcase to drive east to St. Louis. The highway was nearly deserted, an occasional McDonald's or Super 8 Motel sign looming in the darkness. Tracy hadn't slept well; she had been brooding for days about what she was on her way to do. "Luigi keeps telling me, 'Breathe,'" she said. Luigi is Tracy's husband. He is Italian and moved to Missouri from Naples four years ago, after he and Tracy met while teamed up on a Web-design project. Tracy divorced Derrick's father a couple of years before that and had been raising Derrick and his younger sister by herself, on the Columbia property, when Derrick marked his 17th birthday by signing up for the Marines.

He left for boot camp in the summer of 2001, two months after his high-school graduation. The timing is significant, the way Tracy recounts the story, although then she always sighs and says there was really nothing she would have done differently even if she had known what was coming: in August of that year, the World Trade Center had not yet been attacked, nor was the American military in active combat anywhere that Tracy knew of. In any case, Derrick had been declaring since he was 4 that he wanted to become a marine. "Who knows where it started with him?" Tracy told

me. "He had Marine posters in his room. When he was a little kid, he read The Punisher comic books, and The Punisher was a former marine. We have pictures of him crawling on his belly through the grass, arms extended as guns. Chubby-cheeked cherub, out there playing war."

Tracy stared straight at the road. We were still an hour from the St. Louis airport, where we were going to fly to Chicago and wait for someone to pick us up and take us to a place called Elk Grove Village. "When he drew, he drew battlefields," Tracy said. "Tanks. Action pictures. Explosions."

Tracy was raised in a military family, moving in childhood from one base town to another until her parents finally resettled in Missouri, their home state. Her father, a 20-year Air Force communications expert before his 1979 switch to civilian life, served several stints in Vietnam during the closing years of that war. But Tracy's antigun period wasn't strident or directed at her own upbringing; the way she thinks about it now, she was just a late-era counterculture sympathizer who became a young mother in Columbia, which is where the main University of Missouri campus is, and which is sociologically as close to Berkeley as Missouri gets. "That whole flowers-in-your-hair, wear-gauze, dance-to-the-Grateful Dead sort of thing," Tracy said and smiled. The Vietnam flak jacket was kept in a closet at her father's house, where Derrick was allowed to admire it whenever he visited, and by the time he was finishing high school, Tracy had come to believe that her restless, hard-partying, sleep-until-midafternoon teenage son was probably right about the direction and discipline the Marine Corps was going to give him.

She delivered Derrick herself to Kansas City, from which his next stop would be the Marine recruiting center in San Diego. "I'm thinking, Well, he's going to go play war," Tracy said. "O.K. That's what he's done all his life."

One of the first illustrations Tracy put on marineparents.com was a pair of Derrick snapshots, both taken inside Tracy's car. In the first photo, he's on his way to Kansas City, open-mouthed, seat back in full recline, sacked out at 2 p.m. In the second, he's on his way home three months later for the break between boot camp and the early combat training the Marine Corps calls School of Infantry; it's 2 a.m., and Derrick is in uniform, wide awake, shoulders rigid, bolt upright in his seat. Tracy captioned the two photos "The Transformation." "I was like, 'If you're tired, you can put the seat back and go to sleep.' 'No, Ma'am! I'm fine!'" All of Missouri seemed beribboned with post-9/11 American flags by then, Tracy remembers, and she can still do comically vivid impressions of the unfamiliar person suddenly occupying her son's room -- leaping up to make his bed at 6 every morning, sticking his arm out at the tattoo parlor for the "U.S.M.C." across the biceps, eating straight-backed at the kitchen table with elbow held at right angle and both feet squarely on the floor -- and also of the insomniac emotional mess the calamitous times had made of her. She was intensely proud of Derrick, convinced that genuine peril faced the United States and terrified about what would happen next. "After 9/11, the news was on nonstop 24 hours a day, 7 days a week," Tracy said. "And I swear, if I could have, I would have gone to San Diego, grabbed my son by the ear and said: 'Buddy, you made a mistake. Let's go home now.'"

On the flight to Chicago, Tracy read a book she had just bought called "McCoy's Marines," which is an account by John Koopman, a reporter for The San Francisco Chronicle, of his weeks embedded with a Marine unit during the 2003 assault on Iraq. The unit happened to have been Derrick's, and when Tracy got off the plane her eyes were red and swollen and she hurried into the bathroom to rinse her face. In one passage of Koopman's book, the marines' commanding officer tells his men, just before combat against an Iraqi tank division called the 51st: "We're going to slaughter the 51st Mechanized Division. We're going to kill them and make an example out of them." In another, word is spread that Iraqi suicide drivers have begun carrying bombs in ambulances. "The order comes down: You see an ambulance driving fast toward you, shoot it," Koopman writes.

Tracy had put on a black leather coat for the trip to Elk Grove Village, which made her look even taller and more imposing than usual. "You know," she said, as we were standing outside watching for the car that was coming for us, "when your kid grows up to be an architect or something, you think you'll be able to know what they do -- to know something about it."

She lighted a cigarette. "I know he's done things he never imagined he'd do," she said. "And you don't ask the question. I can't bring myself to. You don't ask it. And he never tells."

A white Toyota with two crosses hanging from the mirror pulled up at the curb. A woman with layered, lightened hair got out, shook Tracy's hand and said she was the niece of Georgette Frank, whom Tracy had come to know on the Web site and who was now awaiting our arrival at the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall. We drove through a bleak-looking industrial stretch for a while, country music on the radio, and finally Tracy asked what Georgette looked like. I knew Tracy had an idea about this. She had decided that Georgette must be a big woman, like Tracy -- probably bigger, Tracy thought, and with great wide shoulders. Georgette Frank and her husband, Roy, had organized the marineparents.com event Tracy had come to help supervise, a daylong volunteers' assembly line to pack up boxes for marines in Iraq, and although she had never met Georgette in person or even seen a picture of her, Tracy still kept in the Web site archives the year-old posting from the night the two marines in dress uniforms came to the Franks' house in Elk Grove Village:

TOPIC AUTHOR: HISMOM
POSTED ON: 04/08/2004 21:52:10
MESSAGE: My dear friends -- the Marines just left us -- LCPL Phil our beloved son was killed in action yesterday -- please keep my husband, daughter and me in your prayers. Please pray for my nieces and nephews as well. Our Phil was so loved by all our family. My heart is breaking -- help me

REPLY AUTHOR: TDV
REPLIED ON: 04/08/2004 21:56:25
MESSAGE: Georgette, I pray for God to be with you and your family. Your son is our hero. Please let us know how we can help. My love and prayers are here for you and your family. God bless and semper fi, Tracy

There was a 22:23:31 posting that night directed to Georgette too -- "words mostly fail me. This is a parent's worst fear" -- and one at 00:39:08 and at 1:21:41 and at 1:55:55. All night, into dawn the next day, and long into the following weeks, Tracy read messages from Cindi and Justinsbud and vermontmom and scores of other devastated women; men's names turned up here and there, but mostly they were women, and Tracy pictured them alone at their keyboards, all over the country, typing and crying and trying to think of what to say to Georgette. Tracy had built the Web site in part because she guessed this would happen, that people would want a place where they could sit in the dark making an effort to hold one another up, and although Georgette was neither the first bereaved marineparents.com parent nor the last, she maintained a kind of sorrowful grace on the message boards that Tracy found extraordinarily brave. Months after Phil was killed, shot by an Iraqi sniper during the insurgency in Falluja, Georgette was still a regular on the site, helping out, consoling other parents. She closed each of her postings, "I remain -- as always -- hismom."

At some point in recent weeks, as the planning was peaking for this volunteers' packaging day in Elk Grove Village, it had occurred to Tracy that she was afraid of meeting Georgette. By this time they had talked long distance quite a bit, so she knew that Georgette's bearing on the telephone was as kind and dignified as her presence online. But when Tracy began envisioning the encounter itself, she was panicky about doing the wrong thing. Working from Columbia, deep inside her elaborate web of intimate connections online, Tracy had yet to come into the physical presence of someone whose Marine child was dead. She had caught herself entertaining the idea that there was some grim dress-rehearsal aspect to the situation, as if Georgette were being presented to Tracy as an example of how to press on admirably through grief, and she was sure she was going to fall apart the first time Georgette walked up to say hello. "I keep playing these scenarios out," Tracy told me one night. "How do I act? What do I do? If I cry, that will make her cry, and will bring the pain back up to her. And the inability to have anything to offer, except, 'Here's a hug.'"

Now Georgette's niece, glancing curiously at Tracy, said that her aunt was very small. "Like five feet tall," Georgette's niece said.

"Really!" Tracy said. She sank back in the passenger seat, trying to imagine Georgette small. The Toyota pulled into the parking lot of the V.F.W. hall, and Tracy got out with her suitcase and bumped it slowly up the stairs. She stopped at the top of the landing, taking a deep breath, smoothing her hair with her fingers. There was a lot of activity visible inside, men and women in blue jeans crowding around long tables that were covered with open boxes. Tracy stepped in and set her suitcase down. A voice called out across the room, "*There* she is," and striding toward Tracy came a tiny woman with gold hoop earrings and a black U.S.M.C. T-shirt tucked into her jeans. She had to reach up to get her arms around Tracy's shoulders as they embraced. They stood that way for a long time, swaying slightly, like slow

dancers who have forgotten to move their feet.

"Blouse" means shirt when a marine is referring to his uniform, and "cover" means hat. A "rack" is a bed. "Trash" is personal possessions. "Nasty" means anything pertaining to the civilian world, as in a recruit's nasty relatives, with their nasty disorderly way of walking and speaking and wearing their nasty hair. These are some of the things Tracy learned, trolling the Internet, reading Marine books obsessively, once the war began and Derrick vanished into his first deployment; he telephoned once during that time, from Kuwait, to say that his unit was waiting to invade and that he was using a bank of telephones for marines and that he had exactly one hour of liberty left. After that there was nothing for a long time, and Luigi made Tracy turn off the news because he kept finding her downstairs at 3 a.m. watching CNN or Fox News with both hands to her mouth. On the phone in Kuwait, Derrick's closing comment to Tracy was: "You know what, Mom? There's a Burger King across the street here, and I haven't had anything decent to eat in a month, and if you don't mind I'm going to use my last 10 minutes to get myself a hamburger." She kept thinking about that as she read. She was gaining fluency in abbreviations and acronyms, both online and during the military families' monthly support-group meetings in Columbia: B.C.G.'s are birth-control glasses, Marine-issue eyeglasses, which replace nasty civilian models and are so ugly that they prevent pregnancy because of their propensity for making women lose all interest in the wearer. An M.E.U. is a Marine expeditionary unit, which is different from an M.E.F., a Marine expeditionary force, and an M.E.B., a Marine expeditionary brigade.

An R.P.G. is a rocket-propelled grenade. An I.E.D. is an improvised explosive device. A V.B.I.E.D. is a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. A B.F.G. is a big [expletive] gun.

Barbara Schneider had a big-gun photo of her son, Stephen, which she began carrying around with her in a crumpled phone-bill envelope, along with a dozen other snapshots of him on patrol with his weapons and a folded map of Iraq she had printed off the Internet. Barbara was one of the five mothers Tracy had dinner with every week; they had all met at the monthly support group and liked one another at once, despite the profound differences in their political loyalties and their opinions of the war. Barbara, who has been divorced from Stephen's father for many years, is an ardent Democrat. She has a law degree, works for the University of Missouri and makes a pained face when President Bush's name comes up. In high school, Barbara's son was a university-bound member of the debate team; when he joined the Marine Corps Reserves in August 2002, he told his mother that he didn't see why having been admitted to college should entitle him to some sort of dispensation from responsibility. "He really thinks he has an obligation to this country," Barbara told me one morning. "And he also thinks that if this country is sending 19- and 20-year-old boys to war, why *not* him? Why should they be fighting for him?"

Barbara pulled the phone-bill envelope out of her purse and held it over the coffee-shop table between us -- not brandishing it, exactly, but almost. Stephen was deployed to Iraq in March 2004, 11 months after the United States invaded Baghdad; in September, two-thirds of the way through his tour of duty, the American military death toll topped 1,000. "When I ran into people around town, in this coffee shop, or someone from soccer or Scouts, I would whip out my envelope," Barbara said. "It was really for people to know they knew someone there. I would make people look at it. I would just say, '*This is Stephen*.' It's so easy for people to go about their lives or their business. Saddam Hussein had been found, and people would say to me, 'I thought that was pretty much over.'"

By the time Stephen had left Missouri for his military training, Barbara already knew a fair amount about protest organizations that shared her assessment of the Iraq invasion, which is that it was precipitous and ill conceived and would ultimately do more harm than good. There was Military Families Speak Out, a national antiwar alliance whose logo entwines a yellow support-the-troops ribbon with a 60's-era peace symbol. There were demonstrators every Saturday morning outside the Columbia post office downtown, where a longstanding weekly pacifist vigil has been updated, since the invasion, with banners reading "End the Occupation" and "President Bush: Thou Shalt Not Kill." But Barbara had talked to Stephen at length and seen that he had his own view of the situation and was determined to serve. She was glad the protesters were there -- she didn't agree with the parents in the monthly support-group meetings who called them traitors -- but her own admiration for her son, she concluded, would keep her from picking up a banner and standing on the lawn in front of the post office.

"It's a tough one," Barbara said. The snapshots lay fanned out on the table -- Stephen in cammies on a shot-up rooftop, Stephen's hand pointing to a thermometer registering 130 degrees -- and I wondered aloud how a parent really

manages what Barbara had resolved to do, to support her young adult son's decision to accept discipline and orders from an institution she believes is doing the wrong thing. She sighed. We stared at the pictures. Stephen came home in October; he's a senior in college now, but his commitment to the Marine Corps will keep him on potential call-up rosters until 2010. "I don't completely understand Stephen's position," Barbara said. "But I have so much respect for him that it seems like it's an appropriate resolution. And I'm experiencing this as a mother, not as a male. I never had to wrestle with 'Am I obligated to serve my country in the military?'"

Barbara's office is on the university campus, and walking to and from work among students, she has been ruminating recently about the Vietnam War. "I knew a lot of people in the Vietnam era who were wrestling with whether or not they would go," she said. "It seemed to me that even the people who didn't want to serve wrestled with it in their mind. We thought about it. We talked about it. Everyone talked about it, and discussed it, and what I sense missing now is that same need to. . . . "

She hesitated, searching for the right word. "To grapple with it," she said.

This is one luxury an all-volunteer military provides, especially for those with adequate education and privilege -- this option of sidestepping the enlistment question entirely, and with it a certain kind of difficult decision-making about matters like duty, resistance, justifiable violence, conscientious objection. "So you can be lazy and not think about it," Barbara said. "And that's what a lot of young people are doing. It makes me angry." She considered for a second, and then said, no, that was not quite right. "What makes me angry," Barbara said, "is how can a young person be in favor of this war and not feel they have some obligation to participate in it? That boggles my mind."

Tracy had boxes to send Derrick one morning, so we carried them to the PT Cruiser, and she backed out of the carport to head up the long gravel road past the pond. Two geese glided on the quiet brown water. A Marine Corps flag and a faded yellow ribbon hung from a tree near the house. Inside the boxes were cans of smoked baby clams, Starkist prepackaged tuna-and-crackers lunch kits, beef-jerky packets and enough Girl Scout cookies, Tracy guessed, for a couple of dozen marines. Tracy knows Derrick doesn't like Girl Scout cookies much, but she was enjoying the image of him ripping open the boxes and rolling his eyes and looking around his barracks for someone to give them to. "'Here'" -- Tracy doing what I knew to be a spot-on rendition of the exasperated, affectionate voice of a 22-year-old male being fussed over by his mother -- "'these are from my mom. You know how my mom is.'"

There was a book on the back seat of the car, not yet wrapped in shipping paper, titled "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work." The book had shown up in Tracy's mail after Patricia read about it on the Internet and thought it might be helpful for Derrick and Missy, the young woman Derrick married, rather suddenly, during his last home leave. Derrick was introduced to Missy at a friend's apartment eight weeks before they decided to marry. She is a composed, good-looking 21-year-old who was raising her 2-year-old daughter, working as a receptionist and living at her mother's house in Columbia when Derrick told Tracy that he had fallen in love and that at one point he and his new girlfriend had talked on the telephone for 28 hours straight. The wedding was in January -- church ceremony, Missy in bridal white, Derrick in a tailed tuxedo. They spent 10 days together, in a hotel near a Marine base in Southern California, before Derrick left again for Iraq. Framed bride-and-groom photos now decorate Tracy's house and Missy's mother's, where Missy and her little girl are still living; at Tracy's, the photo hangs right over her desk, as if it were a chart she needed to memorize. Once, at one of the Boone Tavern dinners, the women were deep into a conversation about war veterans' culture shock when I saw Tracy rub her forehead, thinking of Derrick and Missy:

PATRICIA: It's like everybody's staring at them. Especially when they're first back.
TRACY: Derrick wanted normalcy. He'd done two tours already at that point. When they started saying, "Let's get married," that felt like a normal life to him.
BARBARA: There's got to be a sense of -- *this* is life, this is *it*, right *here*. That you can't be planning for five years down the way. These guys have been in a war zone. We haven't had that happen to us.
TRACY: The wedding budget was going through the roof when the kids were getting married. I was really upset for a while. And then I'm thinking: Today Derrick can walk down the aisle. What if nine months from now he can't? What if he's sitting in a wheelchair? And I started writing checks.

Now Tracy looked sheepish as she explained why the book was still unwrapped. "I started to write something in it and pop it in the mail," she said. "And then I thought, Wait a *minute*." It embarrassed her that she had to instruct herself that the inscription ought to come from Missy, not from her; delivering the marriage book to the oil-change facility where Missy works was one of Tracy's errands for the day. She would have thought she had learned enough, watching the mother-wife tension that occasionally snarled into the open on marineparents.com message threads, to be above ever characterizing her son's great romance as a headache. She had come to love both Missy and the cheerful child who called her son Daddy Derrick, but Tracy had figured out that she was capable of fretting for Derrick's marital happiness while simultaneously feeling crestfallen about the number of Iraq-to-Columbia telephone calls that now came to Missy instead of to her. This was not a charming quality to discover in herself. Patrolling her Web site, most of which is accessible to anybody who learns to navigate it, Tracy still sends admonitions to certain mothers she assumes haven't realized that their messages might be read by their own sons or by some Iraqi insurgent. "Does she really want to be calling her Marine son's wife a bitch on a public message board?" Tracy said. "I don't think so."

Tracy had dropped her cellphone into her purse before we left; she always has it with her when she walks out of the house, and today in particular she was expecting to spend some time helping to talk Georgette Frank through her commute home from work. Since the Elk Grove Village box-packing weekend, Georgette had taken to phoning every few days from her car: the Franks were approaching the first anniversary of their son's death, and Georgette had found that the 40 minutes alone in the car at dusk was the hardest part of her day. The conversation starter was always something to do with marineparents.com, but both Tracy and Georgette understood what was really going on, and most recently Georgette had been venting to Tracy about "Eyes Wide Open," an antiwar installation that had been traveling from city to city for more than a year. (The Quaker American Friends Service Committee, which was sponsoring the exhibit, preferred to call it a "memorial to those who have fallen," but Georgette found that disingenuous.) "Eyes Wide Open" included displays on Iraqi casualties and the cost of the war, and the exhibit's centerpiece was row upon row of empty boots, each pair tagged with the name of a dead American service member. Georgette had not seen the exhibit -- thank God she hadn't known when it was in Chicago, she said. But after someone told her that Phil's name was on a pair of boots, Georgette fired off a furious e-mail message to the organizers, demanding that his name be removed and adding that if ending the violence was their most pressing concern, perhaps they should direct their attention at the Iraqi insurgency. The organizers comply when relatives request removal of a name, but the episode rankled nonetheless. "Demeaning his death" was how she put it -- as if Phil hadn't understood the risks when he joined the Marines, she would say; as if he had not died believing that he was helping to liberate a nation. She liked to quote something he said to his father the last time they saw him: "Where else can a guy like me be part of freeing 25 million people out from under the likes of Saddam Hussein?"

So far, Tracy was doing a better job of holding up her end of these conversations than she had thought she would. Sometimes she doesn't know whether to be gratified or unsettled by the agility with which she now moves among women with intensely different ideas about the war -- Georgette, Barbara, Patricia, the volunteer message-board monitors who are so dedicated to marineparents.com that they undergo weeks of training to learn which posts are acceptable and which are not. Acceptable: conversation, comfort, pleas for emotional support, practical information containing no threat to troop security. Unacceptable: troop security threats, libelous remarks, political arguments. These are Tracy's rules, not the Marines'; she takes advice from, but has no official tie to, the corps, and she has tried to make the Web site what she thought she needed most, a noncontentious community in which the panicked parent of a young marine at war could find help making it from one day to the next. "You know, I've got this easy escape route," Tracy remarked as she pulled the PT Cruiser up to Missy's workplace. "I'm sitting here helping people. I don't have to look at the politics. 'Nope! Can't go there! No time for that!'"

I waited in the car while Tracy dropped off the marriage book. She was inside for a long time. When she came back, she was silent and emotional; I thought something had happened between her and Missy, but after Tracy put on her seat belt and gazed at the steering wheel for a minute, she started up the car and said: "She talked to Derrick this morning. They're about to go out on a mission. It's going to get really dangerous for the next few days."

We drove through Columbia and onto the county roads that lead to the Della Vecchias' house. The fields were still bleached and wintry-looking, although the air had begun to turn warm, and after a while Tracy mentioned an Italian political-commentary program she and Luigi were watching on satellite television the evening before. Luigi has been opposed to the Iraq invasion from the start, and Tracy knows enough Italian to have understood that the commentator was saying that an invading army cannot possibly maintain a legitimate advisory role inside the nation it is occupying.

"'Recipe for disaster,'" Tracy said, translating the man's wording. Then, as she turned the car onto the gravel road, she glanced at my notebook and gave me a look that meant *Don't push me on this*. "If we leave in less than three years' time, there will be a civil war," Tracy said. "Then we'll have that blood on our hands. And then we'll be even worse than we are now."

The day before Easter, Tracy and her 19-year-old daughter, Lauren, went over to Missy's with a bag of egg-dyeing kits and two huge baskets full of Easter presents Lauren had bought for Missy's little girl, Kylie. They weren't expensive presents -- there was a wind-up plastic chicken that dispensed jelly beans out its rear end, which broke Tracy up laughing. But she chided Lauren for having bought so much. "For heaven's sake, Lauren," Tracy said, "she's only 2 years old."

"Oh, let me have my fun," Lauren said lightly. "I want a real Easter." Lauren lives with her boyfriend in a nearby town and looks just like Tracy, except that her long curly hair is the color of butter. She and Tracy had been sparring off and on all day. Tracy was in a brittle mood, which Lauren attributed to back pain -- Tracy had spent the morning sorting donations for Marine care packages, kneeling on her office floor over piles of toothbrushes, baby wipes, disposable razors, nail clippers, Q-Tips and black socks -- and to uneasiness about whether Derrick was getting enough sleep. Every time Derrick telephoned home recently, Tracy said afterward that he sounded tired. The calls came every few days during most of this deployment; Derrick had been moved into some sort of building, Tracy knew, where the bunks were thin-mattressed metal and a nearby tent contained computers for e-mailing, telephones for placing international calls and, in a back corner, a Webcam with which the men who wanted to could take turns making face-to-face contact with home.

Sometime during the egg-dyeing evening, Derrick was supposed to show up on a Webcam connection, a two-way live visual accompanying an instant-message chat, and the computer and camera were set up and waiting at Missy's mother's house. I wondered whether that was making Tracy edgy too. Much has been made of the breadth and immediacy of communication in this war, the first large-scale American combat since the proliferation of cellphone technology and the Internet, and I was coming to appreciate how complex it might be for a parent simply to know that it's possible to be linked daily by telephone or e-mail, or even live camera, to a child stationed in a war zone. It must be like keeping an extra muscle clenched all the time, I thought: the cellphone always on; the nervous glance at the caller ID to see if the area code is an unfamiliar one that might signal an overseas patch-through; the steady weight of remembering what may and may not be said amid the double constraints of military security and universal protocol regarding the sorts of questions so often lurking in the backs of anxious parental brains. Are you all right? Are you telling me the truth about being all right? Will you promise me that you will not die before I can talk to you again? What is the most exactly perfect thing I can say to you right now? "You feel entirely responsible, as a mother, for keeping the conversation going without asking stupid questions," Patricia said to me once. "My son had to teach me. Where are you, what did you do today, what are you doing tomorrow -- you can't ask these questions. You just say, 'Stay safe.'"

Missy's mother's house is on a cul-de-sac near town, and once we had settled in, Tracy ordered pizza and Missy's mother put a lot of eggs on to boil. The computer sat on a desk by the front door, where the screen could be seen from anywhere in the living room. There was a vigorously female bustle of activity for a while -- Missy's mother, who is divorced, had also bought Easter presents for Kylie and kept holding up small lacy outfits she had found at Wal-Mart -- and then Missy said, "Whoa, there he is." She darted to the desk and plopped down in front of the screen, where a three-inch-square image of Derrick's face had just appeared. His movements were jerky, and his skin looked sepulchral in the dim greenish Webcam lighting, but he was smiling. A tent pole was visible behind him. The instant-message box on the computer screen read, "hi sweetheart."

Tracy stood in the living room, watching Missy type, and then wheeled around to go back into the kitchen and paint another egg. At first she had left the egg-decorating to Lauren and Missy, who were having a good time making delicate, elaborate designs with the miniature dyeing-kit paintbrushes. Finally Tracy had taken up a brush herself, saying somewhat savagely: "It's Easter. He needs to see an Easter egg." The eggs were filling the cardboard tray by the kitchen sink, dripping small pools of pastel. Missy kept typing and chuckling and showing Kylie how to wave into the Webcam. After half an hour or so, she pushed away from the computer and yelled, "Hey, Tracy?"

TRACY: are you going to be able to sleep more?
DERRICK: have to go to work in like an hour
TRACY: do you need anything besides food?
DERRICK: yeah tell me about it
TRACY: are the insects starting to come out yet? or is it still too cold?
DERRICK: still too cold
TRACY: good . . . no bugs
DERRICK: I'm in a barracks now
TRACY: Missy made a better egg than mine mine has hearts & dots
missy has a house, bushes, swing set and clouds on her egg

Now Tracy was laughing and called Missy over to hold up her house-and-bushes egg in front of the Webcam. The sky on the egg was golden, and there were turquoise clouds and a deep purple sunset.

DERRICK: looks good
TRACY: damn
I wanted to be the best

Tracy's fingers paused above the keyboard. Derrick seemed to have bent over, and she gazed at the top of his blurry, murky, green-tinted, close-cropped head. It was 5 a.m. in Falluja.

TRACY: I say ho dang now instead of swear words
Kylie taught me
DERRICK: that is good
but if she keeps telling you the right thing to say she will never get to Harvard
TRACY: take care of YOU keep God with you buddy
watch out for your brothers.
okay
love you

That night I lay in the downstairs room where Tracy was putting me up, the bedroom that used to be Derrick's, and studied the silhouettes of the objects left behind: a few sports trophies, a high-school-graduation mortarboard, a half-dozen stuffed animals rescued from end-of-childhood discard and squashed into a high corner on the shelves. I was thinking about a DVD that a marine in Derrick's unit had titled "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and sent back to Missouri a couple of weeks before. The DVD set a half-hour of raging heavy-metal music against a pulsing video-and-stills lineup the young marine had assembled quite expertly. Bodies, exploded torso, helicopters, bodies, desert hills, bodies, bomb cloud, bodies, sunset, kneeling prisoners, bodies, man struggling in the street until his head snaps back and he drops -- the only internal coherence in the whole DVD was one brief sequence in which a half-dozen bored-looking marines took turns electrocuting a trapped gecko, and the first time Tracy watched it from start to finish I could see her sag in her chair. Derrick belongs to the Marine unit that helped pull down Saddam Hussein's statue in April 2003, and sometimes Tracy can still make herself visualize the cheering people in the square, or the women and children waving at the Humvees as they rolled through Baghdad that month, or the photos of the jocular-looking troops with their arms slung around one another's shoulders. But there's such a paucity of bearable images available to a parent whose child is at war, and it seemed to me, as I tried to fall asleep in Derrick's bedroom, that even the lucky parents -- the grateful ones, the ones whose sons and daughters come home intact -- must have to learn how to carry the burden both of imagining what happened over there, what was seen and done and experienced, and of understanding how much they will never really know.

"It's the pieces you don't see that they've got to work through," Tracy had said. One section of her Web site is called "Post War Coping Strategies & Help"; it includes links to veterans' stress-disorder assistance and to articles with titles like "The War of Emotions" and "The Other Battle: Coming Home." It would be nice not to have to make use of any of these resources, either for Derrick or for herself, after he leaves Iraq this summer for what Tracy fervently hopes will be the last time. "One of the things Derrick said to me was, 'I never want to pull a trigger again,'" Tracy said. "And when I think about that, my prayers then turn to: 'Please, God, give him the strength to pull the trigger when he needs to. Please, God, give him the strength to know when it's the right time to do it.'"

When I woke the next morning, it was barely light outside, but Tracy was already at her computer. She was smoking at her desk, which she usually doesn't do, and her face was bleak. "I got a D.O.D.," she said.

A D.O.D. is what Tracy calls a death notice from the Department of Defense. These notices come to her as e-mailed press releases, each with a headline that identifies the service the deceased American belonged to; when she sees "Marine Casualty," Tracy passes the official information directly to the message boards of marineparents.com, so she can make accurate the latest fearful online rumors started by an unverified posting or a televised news report. I looked over Tracy's shoulder at the message on her computer screen. "Cpl. Bryan J. Richardson, 23, of Summersville, W.Va., died March 25 as a result of hostile action in Al Anbar Province, Iraq."

I asked Tracy how long she had known that there was a new Marine death. "Since yesterday morning," she said. "CNN said something about it, but they were vague, and everybody was in a panic. The message boards were popping. The posts yesterday were full of it. But there was no D.O.D., not until now."

She had walked around with it all day in other words; she had known, at Missy's, but she hadn't known the details, only that it wasn't Derrick, first because the Marines had not come to her house and then because Derrick was there, on Missy's computer screen, examining his wife's painted egg. Tracy had said nothing because that's what she has taught herself to do, between the initial rumors and the arrival of the D.O.D.'s: say nothing, pray, wait for Derrick to call, sprint around the Web site to see whether it's the child of someone she has come to know. Tracy was typing now -- "Let's remember him and his family in our prayers" -- and I asked whether she was thinking about Cpl. Bryan J. Richardson's house in Summersville, W.Va., and she said, yes, she was. "The knocking on the door," she said.

Tracy jammed her cigarette into the ashtray, hard.

"And the way I'd react: You've got the wrong house. I just talked to my son. This can't be right. Denial is the first thing. And knowing there's just complete and total despair in somebody's home right now. This is their Easter."

She started to cry. "And I feel so grateful, and then so guilty," she said. "Nobody's going to say, 'Thank God, it wasn't my son.' But that's what we're all thinking."

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