The Demilitarized Zone

Anthony Doerr

Paper my son has carried with him, touched a pen to. I press it to my nose but it smells like notebook paper, nothing more:

Dad—the birds. Sea eagles. Ducks like mallards only more beautiful. Egrets, but not like our egrets—taller, wilder. I watch them with the spotting scope and they look dirty and ragged, like deposed kings. They stab the mud with their long beaks.

I want to know their names—I ask everybody but no one knows or cares. I even shout questions at the North Koreans, but what do they know. Grandpop, I think, would know.

I’ve learned that the huge, short-tailed bird with the black neck is called a red-crowned crane. Ahn told me; he calls the crane turumi, bird of peace. But Northerners, he says, call it something else, something like “messenger of death.” He says the KPA have built huge birdfeeders that they stock with poisoned snails. Ahn hates the Northerners though, and it’s hard to know out here what is true and what is made up.

And then there is this diarrhea. Painful, awful. I haven’t been to the Doc. Don’t tell Mom. Tell her I’m fine.
friend, waiting for her at his condo: He'll dress up as a vampire, maybe, or an axe-murderer, something involving fake blood.

"Let me see a letter," she says.

"Maybe you should get going," I say.

"Just show me one letter. Christ. He's my son, too."

I bring her one from August. I know what it says: _I think of Grandpop out there in the mud, carrying a full load, the hills lit with artillery. I want to ask him: Grandpop, were you scared? Did you take a single minute for granted?_

She looks up. "You're not going to let me see a new one?"

"That is a new one."

"Don't lie to me, Davis."

"Yeah. Well."

She shakes her head and swears. Pop makes small blue circles, slowly filling the body of a cartoon jack-o'-lantern.

"You know," she says, "this little bleeding-martyr thing you're doing is wearing me out."

They're real estate agents, my wife and he. I found them in the worst, most hackneyed way: in his Chevy Tahoe, in the parking lot of the Sun Valley Lodge. I was driving past and saw her truck (next to his) and thought I'd stop to ask what she wanted for dinner.

She moved out the next week. That was in July. Our son still doesn't know.

_Mom & Dad: Today I was in the fore bunker when a flock of gulls—a thousand of them at least—came wheeling out of the mist, so low I could see individual feathers in their wings. It took a couple of minutes for them to pass over me. Maybe it was the diarrhea pills, or the silence of the morning, but I felt invisible out there, like a ghost, those birds sailing over me like they've probably sailed over this spot for millions of years, their_
eyes registering me as no more important than a stump, a patch of dirt. I thought: They are more involved in the world than I will ever be.

It’s snowing now, back at the garrison, and everything is gray and dismal. Behind me, toward Seoul, I can see a line of tail-lights fading all the way down the highway.

I buy him books on birds and Asian mammals and wrap them in Christmas paper and ship them out. At night I dream: tiger tracks in the snow—a thousand birds spilling over trees. Asiatic bears, Amur leopards. Above and to both sides is thick netting. I wake thinking: We are all animals, pacing a hallway, sea-to-sea.

On Thanksgiving I go out after Pop is tucked in and walk the cold, brilliant road over the saddle toward the Big Wood Condos where she and the boyfriend live. His place is on the first floor, backed against the sage, and I leave the road and climb well above it until I can descend through the darkness and peer through his patio door.

They’re around a big table with some others: his family maybe. He’s wearing a cashmere vest. She waves a wineglass as she talks. Her pants are shiny and gold; I’ve never seen them before. On the counter behind them sits a ravaged turkey.

He says something, she throws back her face and laughs, laughing hard and genuine, and I watch them a bit longer before I retreat, back through the moonlight, the way I came.

Mom, Dad: There are rumors again that the North has made a bomb. Everyone is a little more tense, dropping things, yelling at each other. From Gamma Post I used to watch the skyline of Kaesong through a range finder—I could see the roof of a temple, three smokestacks, one cement building. Roads wind-

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ing in and out. But nothing: no one. No smoke lifting from the stacks, no cars winding up the roads.

Ahn comes to see me in the field clinic and asks why I am here and I say because I have parasites in my intestines, and he says, no, why in Korea. I think a bit and then say to serve my country. He groans and shakes his head. He says he’s here because he has to give three years of service or they’ll kill him.

The first Saturday in December I strap Pop into snowshoes and we go up into the hills with a tree saw and a plastic toboggan. The snow is already deep in places and Pop founders a bit but he does well: His heart is as strong as ever. Halfway up the valley below Proctor Mountain, high above the golf course mansions, we find a tree that is about right and I clear the snow from its base and cut it down.

Later, as I drag it home through the snow, the toboggan tips on a slope and the tree rolls off. I turn, but before I can even take a step, Pop has gone to his knees and wrestled it back onto the sled and lashed it down with a piece of cord he must have had in his coat pocket. As if he understood—as if he, too, didn’t want to see this one particular tradition fail.

I’m in the crawlspace going through boxes when I realize she has taken all the ornaments.

On the tenth of December I get this:

Dad: Yesterday morning I was out of my cot, looking out the window, when two cranes came soaring out of the DMZ, as silent as gods. They were maybe forty feet away when one hit a communication wire and went down, cartwheeling. I couldn’t
believe how fast it fell. The wires shook and trembled. The sound was like a bundle of sticks getting crushed. The bird lay there on the pavement squirming a bit.

I watched it for maybe three minutes and it didn't stop squirming and no one came by. Finally I pulled on my boots and went out.

The crane was maybe five feet tall. Its beak was working back and forth, like it was chewing, but the top portion no longer matched up with the bottom portion. I think part of it was paralyzed because its legs didn't move.

Its partner flapped down from a tree and watched me from a Dumpster like some ancient white monk. I crouched over the wounded one for maybe five minutes. It was working its huge beak and its eyes were panicking and only one Jeep passed in all that time and the other bird just watched me from the Dumpster.

You'll think I'm crazy but I picked the crane up. It weighed more than you'd think a bird would, maybe twenty pounds. I was worried it would fight but it just lay limp in my arms, watching me. It smelled like the rice paddies do here, like slugs and snails.

I carried it across the road, past the first post and to Ahn, who was just finishing his watch in Delta Tower. "Ahn," I said, "what can I do with this?" But he just looked at the bird and looked at me and would not touch it. While we were standing there the crane died—it's eye stopped moving, and I could feel something go out of it. Ahn looked at me a minute, and opened the gate and without quite knowing what I was doing, I carried the bird out past the wire into the DMZ.

I stopped maybe three hundred yards out, beneath a scrubby patch of oak. There are mines all over the place that far out and I couldn't bring my feet to go any farther. Across the way the forest was still and dark.

The ground was frozen, but if you want to dig a hole, I guess, you can always dig one. I set the crane in and kicked dirt over it and covered it up.

Unauthorized Absence, AWOL, I know. I was so scared of mines that after I got it buried I didn't move much. It was cold. I watched the blank face of the forest to the North.

The ROK came after me about twenty minutes later. They had dogs. I am lucky, I guess, that they didn't shoot. There was a lot of shouting and rifle-cocking and writing things down on clipboards. I don't know what will happen: They say court martial but the Doc tells me not to sweat it. As I write now the loudspeakers start up, metallic and loud. I miss Idaho; I miss mom.

I dial the only number I have for Camp Red Cloud, in Uijongbu, South Korea, and a night sergeant tells me to wait and comes back and says I should try next week sometime. I stare at our wispy, illegal tree in the corner; it is already losing needles. I take one of Pop's coloring books, a Christmas one, and cut out the pictures he has finished. A blue reindeer, an orange Joseph, a green infant Jesus: all meticulously colored. With tape I fix them to the branches: shepherds there, Mary here. I give Jesus the top.

The next afternoon I get this:

Dad: Do you remember Grandpop's job at the tree farm? Near Boardman? All those poplars. I remember driving the service roads with him on a four-wheeler. What was I, seven? Grandpop drove fast, acre after acre of poplars going past on both sides, and I remember that as I looked down the rows, for a half-second I could see all the way to the back of the farm, maybe a mile deep, to a pocket of light—like a distant grove, almost imaginary—and it would flash each time at the end of every
row, long lines of white trunks whisking by between, and that
light repeating at the back, like one of those flip-books where you
flip the pages and make a horse look like it's running.

They have IVs in my arms. The diarrhea is awful; I can
feel everything flowing out. Giardia lamblia, Doc tells me.
When it gets very bad it's a feeling like watching those poplars
of Grandpop's rush past, and that light at the end repeating
like that.

There won't be a court martial, anything like that. Word is
they'll send me home. Ahn will be okay, too—his sergeant likes
birds.

It is a day before the solstice, and just after dark, when the
phone rings and my son is on the other end. Already I can feel
the tears starting, somewhere in the backs of my eyes. "Day
after tomorrow," he says, and all I can think of is Christmas
morning, and his mother, how she used to sit on the stairs,
looking down at the tree, waiting for us to wake up so we could
start in on the gifts.

"About Mom," I say, but he has already hung up. Upstairs I
get the shoebox of letters and tie it shut with ribbon. I put Pop
in his coat and gloves, and together we leave the house and
climb toward the saddle.

The snow falls softly, just enough to carry a little light in it.
Pop climbs steadily, stepping in my footprints.

At the Big Wood Condos we walk to the end of the first
floor. I listen a moment—it is quiet—and leave the shoebox at
the door.

Then we turn, climb back to the saddle, and make the top
of the hill, our breath standing out in front of us. From there
we can see the lights of Ketchum below: the dark spread of the
golf course, the Christmas lights along the fence into town,
the headlights of snowcats roving the flanks of the ski moun-
tain, packing the snow in—and the town itself, twinkling in
the valley, the little roof of our house small among the snowy
rooftops, and all the mountains of Idaho beyond it. Some-
where, above it all, our boy is crossing over the ocean, coming
home.