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## **Love, War, and Irony**

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WAITIN FOR PRIVATE! GET YOUR ASS MOVIN! THE ENEMY WON’T GIVE A DAMN IF YOUR KNEES ARE SCRAPED RAW AND YOU GOT A CUT ON YOUR PRETTY LITTLE FACE!” That was the song Private Alberto Garcia heard his drill sergeant sing while at basic training for the army in 2001 at Ft. Jackson, SC. The dance was to low crawl 300 meters with a one-foot clearance under concertina wire while machine guns fired tracer rounds 25 feet above his head under the cover of darkness. Some never made it out of that dance; some just covered until it was over. But not Garcia, he refused to give up and pushed through; bloody knuckles, knees, face, and aching muscles did not stop him. He was determined to make it through his last two weeks of basic training and graduate in spite of the fear and pain. All through his basic training, Garcia never understood why Ft. Jackson was referred to as “relaxin-jackson.” Later through stories shared with other soldiers brought to light the answer on how Ft. Jackson got its name . . . it was sarcasm.

In spring of 2003, a once Private and now Specialist Garcia met a beautiful young woman through a childhood friend. Her name was Catalina DeLaMora; she lived with her very traditional Latin family in the small rural town of Sedona, California. Garcia visited her often and as they grew to know each other, Catalina became an inspiration, bringing out the best in him. Garcia had always wanted to go to college; but didn’t believe that he could afford it.

Catalina believed in him, brought him scholarship applications and helped him fill them out. It was through Catalina's kindness and support that Garcia fell completely in love with her.

That summer he received an award letter, "*Congratulations Alberto Garcia you have been awarded the Foundation Scholarship...*" Garcia was so excited he called Catalina up immediately to give her the news. "I'm so proud of you," she said. "I know you're going to do great." He explained to her that he needed to fax his acceptance letter and was on his way to his unit to use their fax machine. "I love you," he thought as they parted over their cell phones.

When Garcia arrived at his unit, he immediately felt tension in the air. "Good morning Master Sergeant," Garcia said to his supervisor. "I need to fax a couple doc's real quick, and I'll be out of your hair." "What's it for?" asked his supervisor. "Well, it's an awesome deal," explained Garcia. "I just received a scholarship award from the college in town." After a long pause the Master Sergeant's look was stern and his voice firm when he said, "Before you fax anything, here are you're orders. You're going to Iraq to support Task Force Pike from our battalion in Balad. Pack your things, say your goodbyes and report back at 0700 hours two weeks from today."

That night Garcia's drive home was long and quite. He felt numb and knew that he had to say goodbye to his family and...Catalina. He had only known Catalina a few months, but in his heart he knew she was the one. In fact, Garcia would often quietly say to himself, "One day I'm gonna marry that girl." and more often than not, would daydream of all the children they would have and the big house they would live in some day in the country. But today he mourned. He mourned a life that he might not make it back to and a love that Garcia was certain he would lose. His dreams of a life with Catalina were now shattered and as he sat there at a stop light, it seemed that time was not on his side; seconds seemed like minutes, minutes like hours.

He would give anything to just disappear into a world without war, hate, or hunger. He would give anything to be with Catalina right now and he would give anything for that stupid light to turn green! Finally, after what seemed like hours, Garcia arrived at his apartment. Instead of calling Catalina, he went to bed crushed and depressed. As Garcia lay there he turned off his phone and stared at the ceiling for hours with tears running down the side of his face until he fell asleep.

The next day Garcia was up by 0430. He started some coffee and waited for the sun to rise. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the sun rise, and as he watched, his thoughts drifted back to his beautiful Catalina. Immediately after watching the magnificent sunrise, he took a cold shower and started planning his next few weeks. "If these are going to be my last two weeks of sweet freedom, I'm going to make sure I make the best of it." His first step would be to get his gear together, make a list of some things he would need, and call storage unit locations for pricing. He also phoned his parents to let them know he would be stopping by later that evening.

So Garcia set out to the military clothing store to purchase extra uniforms and other miscellaneous gear. At the store, he spotted a flower shop nearby and remembered that Catalina loved pink roses. He purchased two beautiful bouquets of flowers; one bouquet for Catalina and another bouquet for his mother Maria. He drove to Catalina's house and gave her the bouquet of pink roses. "I know how much you love pink roses," he said. Catalina smiled graciously and said, "thank you, I told you I loved red and white roses, but I love'em, they're beautiful." Catalina had successfully made a brown man turn red as Garcia was embarrassed but could only smile as she gave him a kiss. "Will you go for a drive with me?" he asked. "I have something serious I need to discuss with you."

The drive was long and as Garcia broke the news to her there was dead silence. Neither knew what to say to the other. Then Catalina asked, “Where are we going?” “I hoped you would be willing to go with me to my mother’s to break the news to her,” said Garcia. Catalina was silent once more and as Garcia was about to tell her that he was out of line for making such a request, she spoke. “I would love to go with you. I love you.” Garcia smiled; Catalina had made his day with such beautiful words.

As they arrived; Garcia had the second bouquet in hand as he climbed up the steps of his mother’s home with Catalina. His mother looked terrible. The Family Readiness Group for his unit had already called to notify her of her son’s departure and offer their support. Although they had not given her any details, Maria’s motherly instinct kicked in . . . she knew her son would be going to war. As Garcia handed the bouquet of flowers to his mother, she threw them across the living room and ran to her bedroom. Catalina took leave to the car, Garcia went to his mother. As he slowly opened the door, Garcia’s eyes grew moist as he saw his mother crying in her pillow. He sat next to her and uttered, “Mom I’m sorry, but I have to go to Iraq, I’ll be home for the next couple of weeks...” suddenly, his mother stopped crying and stared at him with rage in her eyes. “Take your whore and leave!” she cried. Garcia was speechless, and tears ran down his face uncontrollably. “I love you Mom. No matter what you say I’m your son and you’ll always be my mom.” Garcia would call his mother every day for the next two weeks and also while in Iraq; but to no avail. This forever remained a heavy scar in his heart.

The next day Garcia and Catalina started to live what he would later recall as “the best 13 days of his life.” They spent their days traveling and visiting museums, aquariums, zoos and doing all sorts of activities. They were young, full of fun and very much in love. Every night when the sun would go down, they made love as if it were the last night they would ever be

together. But all too soon the last day arrived. That evening Garcia took Catalina to a long romantic dinner at a beautiful Italian restaurant and littered their honeymoon suite with rose pedals, candles, and chocolates. Although they weren't married, it was clear they had something very special. They were soul mates and they had something that no one else on the planet had at that moment in time...complete and total love for one another. That night while lying in bed next to Catalina, Garcia once again lay awake unable to sleep. A million thoughts raced through his mind, but none like the thought he had just two weeks ago when he wanted time to move faster while sitting at a stop light. Now he would give anything for this moment to last forever.

The plane departed McCord Air force Base and arrived in Kuwait with no delays or complications. "How convenient," Garcia mumbled under his breath. Just then, the plane's pilot announced over the intercom, "...it's 121 degrees in Kuwait and we'll be landing in 15 minutes." Garcia would later compare the intensity of 121 degrees on black asphalt to "the equivalent of someone holding a hot blow dryer to your face." "Whew, it's a bit toasty," he said as the ground crew directed his group to load onto the three buses waiting for them off the flight line. Everyone loaded up single file filling each bus waiting to take them to their destination. As Garcia stepped into the air conditioned bus, he felt relieved. He noticed the windows were covered and was unable to see much on his two hour trip to the US military base, Camp Doha. Garcia stepped out, viewed his surroundings and thought, "What a dump." Suddenly he heard a Master Sergeant yell out, "Specialist Garcia, Task Force Pike!" Garcia hollered, "MOVING Master Sergeant," scooped up his bags and hustled toward the Master Sergeant's direction. Garcia shook his hand. "Follow me," the Master Sergeant said, and they were on their way.

Garcia processed into Kuwait, given three quick briefings about the base and the Middle East, and shown his living quarters for the next two to three days while he awaited a flight to

Balad. The very next day the Master Sergeant walked into his tent and said, “shower up and pack your bags, you’re flight leaves at 1800 hours.”

Ten minutes before landing in Iraq, the pilot jumped on the intercom. “Looks like Balad’s being mortared. We’re gonna have to make a combat landing; so tighten up your seat belts.” Garcia thought his ears were going to explode, his stomach was saying “hi” to his throat, and his back-pack went for a walk. While the C-130 was still moving on the runway, the ramp to the rear of the plane opened half-way, and Garcia grabbed his gear. When they came to a complete stop, the ramp lowered the rest of the way and Garcia and his unit shuffled single-file out the back of the plane and immediately started running towards a bunker just off the runway. An explosion on the other side of the runway seemed to help Garcia and the others run faster. “Now that’s motivation,” he said sarcastically.

Sergeant First Class Hoight took charge of the group and asked if everyone was ok. Garcia and the other soldiers were panting and looked like they had just seen a ghost. “Well Sarge, my feelings are hurt,” Garcia thought, but decided to keep his mouth shut; given the situation. Just then a siren went off in the distance. Everyone looked at each other with uncertainty. “GARCIA, FOLLOW ME! CORPORAL YOU’RE IN CHARGE! WAIT HERE UNTIL I GIVE YOU FURTHER DIRECTIONS” yelled Sergeant Hoight as he started running. Garcia was right behind him “Man, for an old fart this guy can run pretty fast,” he thought. Quickly the two approached a large tent, went inside and observed other soldiers removing their helmets and body armor. Sergeant Hoight looked at Garcia and said, “Garcia, go back and get everyone over here. Tell them it’s all clear.” “MOVING SERGEANT,” Garcia yelled. Little Garcia know that would be the last time he saw Sergeant Hoight.

They say war changes people; and so this was true of Garcia. The months in Iraq passed quickly while conducting missions and dodging bullets. Although his mother never answered his calls, sent care packages, or wrote a letter, Garcia took solace in his lovely Catalina. They spent hours on the phone, exchanged love letters on a weekly basis, and Catalina sent him “care packages” often. One day Garcia stopped calling. Catalina became worried and sent several letters that he did not answer. Finally, after four weeks of not hearing from him, Garcia called. His voice was shaking as he explained that he couldn’t say much. There had been an explosion and he watched many people die. He began to weep as he said, “There was so much blood . . . I tried to put his guts back in but it didn’t help. I’m sorry . . . I gotta go. I love you.” Eventually Garcia started calling Catalina again; however, she noticed he had changed. He was no longer as open and sensitive, made harsh comments, and was suspicious and controlling. Nevertheless, Catalina stood by him.

The “newbie’s” arrived about a month before Garcia was scheduled to depart from Iraq with his unit. Anytime they heard a mortar round hit the base or machine guns in the background they would get wild-eyed and ready to charge the enemy. Garcia would chuckle and remember his experience the first couple months after arriving and realized how much war had changed him. “These poor guys are going have it rough until their first close encounter,” he thought recalling the first time his boots touched Iraqi ground.

A week before Garcia’s unit was scheduled to leave, the Colonel called a meeting and briefed them of their departure and the information they could disclose to family members. Then he released all soldiers below the rank of Sergeant First Class and Garcia rushed to shopping central. At shopping central (also known as the “Bazaar”) there were third world nationals from India, Pakistan and Thailand. At the Bazaar he bought gifts for his family and Catalina and

packed what he could carry, and mailed what he couldn't. "I can't believe I'm going home," he kept saying to himself.

The trip home started and ended very much the same it had when Garcia first came to Iraq. The difference was he spent a week in Kuwait at Ali Al Salem Military Base. Camp Doha had been decommissioned. Garcia went to the military store to buy a fresh new uniform for his arrival home and while he was there Bo Jackson arrived to sign autographs. Garcia jumped in line and Bo signed his hat. "Right on! Good thing I'm here, I'm going to need a new hat," said Garcia.

The plane ride was silent as Garcia and his unit left Kuwait and countless memories of war passed through his mind. An announcement from the Colonel came over the intercom before landing on US soil. "We have a short stay in Bangor, Maine. I know you soldiers are happy to be home. You are allowed a maximum of two drinks as long as you are over the age of 21." Abruptly, the once deafening silence was broken with applause, whistling and thunderous Army "hooah's!"

When the plane touched down at McCord Air force Base, Garcia felt nervous and scared. "How ironic, I feel the same way I did when I arrived in Iraq." he said. "Yea, I know." said the soldier next to him. It was evening and raining as the soldiers turned in their weapons and loaded on the bus for the drive to the Ceremony. Their trip was silent and dark as they drove through town. Someone broke the ice by exclaiming, "I can't wait for Taco Bell to give me the runs again!" Everyone laughed and then . . . silence once more. When the bus rolled to a stop at the Ceremony site, the soldiers stepped off the bus single-file. A ceremony coordinator hollered instructions as they moved into formation. At this point, Garcia felt anxious. He wanted to see his family and above all Catalina.

Garcia felt chills when the soldiers were greeted with thunderous applause as they marched into the Ceremony. The Sergeant yelled “GROUP HALT...LEFT FACE,” Garcia immediately searched the stands for the familiar faces of his family and felt despair as he realized they weren’t there. Suddenly, he spotted his beloved Catalina sitting with her brothers and their wives. As their eyes met, she smiled down at him and a multitude of emotions overwhelmed him as a tear rolled down his face. The General said a few words, so did the Governor but Garcia didn’t hear a word until the General announced, “I know you’re all anxious to be with your soldiers. Colonel, dismiss them.” “Everyone WILL report to the Demobilization site at 0900 hours exactly one week from today...DISMISSED.” Alberto maneuvered left and right until he stopped right in front of Catalina. He looked deep into her eyes and embraced her, holding her tight, never wanting that moment to end. As they walked hand-in-hand from the gymnasium, Garcia felt a sense of pure freedom. He turned and looked at Catalina’s smile and her beautiful eyes and sighed, as he said quietly, “I’m home.”

*Based on actual events, only the names, dates, and locations have been changed.*