

**\*\*Grand Prize Winner\*\***  
**2013 Student Storyteller**

**A BOY**  
**BY SOPHIE ZANDER**

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**H**e was a picture taped to my mirror, washed sepia with edges faded as if dipped in coffee. Just a boy in dusty camouflage, engulfed in a sea of caramel sand. He was smiling gently as he cradled his gun, the ebony metal protruding from the nude sienna spectrum.

I sat in a room smelling of moth balls and linen, my fingers stroking the mahogany leather binding of his journal. Discovered in a drawer shoved behind empty Marlboro cartons, I remained uncertain whether to open the leaden steel cage of his mind and let the things he had so tightly locked away cascade out. I was attempting to resurrect the person in the picture, as if he had been swallowed by the camera directly after the moment was captured.

After 12 months in Afghanistan, he was changed. Waning crescent moons of fatigue hung below his eyes like low swung hammocks in the evening; the anchoring burgundy and plum swirling together in a deep embrace. He was a boy when he left, yet he returned a stranger. A veteran.

It has been 1 month 2 weeks and 3 days since I found the note lying upon the linoleum kitchen-counter.

He left it scrawled on a grease pocked Chinese takeout menu; “not enough space, gone for some air – ”

1 month 2 weeks and 3 days since he’s been gone.

I slowly opened the journal with the hushed hope that each page would provide a new lens of clarity.

“2/8/13 The smell comes over me like a thick blanket, suffocating. When the heat reminds me of Afghanistan summers and that aroma comes creeping back, it penetrates my pores and I am once again drenched in Sangin. The sharp pungencies that wafted from the mud-walled homes can only be remedied by the mellowing warmth of Stolnaya.”

“2/26/13 Every damn night sleep escapes me; the bright cerulean eyes of Afghani children stripped me. Hollowed me out.”



“3/2/13 Today I had what a Google search tells me was a ‘panic attack.’ After having insurgents make constant attempts on my life, I cannot understand why my brain turns upon me once I’m safely back in Texas, simply walking through the Costco parking lot. It doesn’t make sense, the sound of unseen cars’ wheels upon the pavement and alarms clicking doors locked overwhelmed me. My heart thumped violently and sweat beaded with disdain upon my brow, every fiber pulsed with a bizarre sense of dread. IEDs? Logic was like water in a sieve, it escaped me. I was thrown back into the Humvee bumping along the narrow dirt roads when we saw a man wave, grinning as he then pulled a detonation cord to activate an explosive buried in the road. My world shook, catapulting our worn bodies and sending my mind into reverberations that have not yet calmed. Like an echo cast against a mountain that ricochets infinitely, my mind remains unable to find the solidity of focus.”

“3/13/13 Every night of my deployment while laying in bed I would project the same imaginary scene against the dark screen of my shut eyelids. In it, I’m wearing a cobalt robe, the golden tassel on my cap dancing as I grab Valentina around her hip and pull her close, my other hand grasping a college diploma. Every night. I guess that will stay a dream, confined to Nyquil induced imaginations. The Pentagon’s ‘sequestration’ of college aid has made a successful education only obtainable with codeine laced syrup, the injustice is unfathomable.”

“4/5/13 This is it - I feel as if I am in a shallow trench, clawing the soft earth with bloody fingernails, wailing my hand in the bitter air hoping, praying, to feel the firm entwinement of flesh as a palm grasps me, helping to pull me up. Instead my fingers comb through the silken mane of the wind, and I fall deeper into the cavernous darkness of my mind as memories consume me. This perpetual vertigo hounds me, I cannot shake this nauseating unease that claws me apart. I cannot breath. I am suffocating. I must find air...”

I close the journal.

The clock’s hands silently greet the 12, echoing midnight.

1 month 2 weeks and 4 days...

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*Sophie Zander is a junior at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. She has a double-major in English and Politics and a minor in Environmental Studies. In addition to interning at the HALC Legal Centre in Sydney, Australia, as part of her semester-abroad experience, Sophie’s on-campus involvements include serving as the Ursinus’ Pre-Legal Studies intern; vice president of the Haines-Barnard Pre-Law Society; on the Journal of Political Science and International Relations editorial boards; and with the National Model United Nations committee. Additionally, she has served on the Lantern Literary editorial board and written for the Grizzly Newspaper. Sophie looks forward to an internship in Washington, D.C., this summer, facilitated by her selection as a Whitman Summer Scholar, working to address public policy issues. Sophie has a dual interest in addressing social injustice and a passion for writing that she hopes will both serve to make a positive impact someday.*



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