

In the Army Now

Robert Craig Tebbe

Name: _____(Print Name). Social Security Number: _____. My e-mail, address, phone number, sex, height, weight; how many times do I have to write these down? The monotony in these forms is unbearable! I don't care if it is the Army Cadet Enrollment packet. Nobody should have to go through all this. I mean, I thought they wanted people to sign on. I guess if I am too lazy to fill out this silly packet, then I shouldn't join the army. Who am I kidding? I cannot wake up at five in the morning to go running. I wonder if I am really cut out for this. I have never been the "running type" anyway. I am the "football type," big and burly. Now, my older brother, Brett, he is the "running type." He is eight years older than me. He is tall, skinny, brilliant, a womanizer, and one of the most bitter, cynical people I know. He serves in the Army as an officer and just bosses around all the, what he calls, "sad little pansy-ass panty pushers of the nation." He once told me that his job was to be a glorified baby-sitter, and the years of growing up with me were all the training he needed to deal with his men. Now, I don't know if that was an insult to me or to our armed forces, but I do know that I do not want to be a "panty pusher." I don't think I am cut out for the Army. I am not Brett. I look up to him and try to be like him, but he's like God really. You try to live in his image and follow his teachings, yet no matter how hard you try to impress him or call to him, he never answers when you want. Surprisingly, he envies me.

"You do not know how lucky you are! You are built for a sport I would be crushed in! You do not understand the feeling you will get playing football and what it will give you! You will be disciplined, tough, and you will be king of the school!"

Something I never had the opportunity to have handed to me,” Brett shouted at me. He was home for the summer before my freshman year in high school. I was trying to decide whether or not I wanted to play football, and I was learning all I could about the game--mostly, so that I wouldn't have to ask someone in my family what “TD” meant and be beaten with a blunt object.

My brother was on leave for fourteen days before he would be shipped out to the Middle East. He decided to use his precious time to come home and force me to train for football. I was playing video games in the cool basement of our Minnesota home. My brother burst through the door, startling me. He watched me play for a second before saying, “Get dressed. We're going running.” Dread consumed me.

I procrastinated putting on the proper clothes and shoes. I scrounged through my drawers looking for shorts and ended up finding basketball shorts that were too big for me and hung past my knees. I pulled the best crappy shirt I could find out of my closet. I looked in the mirror and frizzled what my brother calls “granola-eating, tree-hugging, hippie hair.” I didn't want to go, but I did not want to be sucking eggs at the first few practices either.

After he yelled a few more times, we went running through the neighborhood. Along the way he taught me some pretty funny cadences he ran to in the army. The cadences made me not notice the stinging sweat dripping down into my eyes or the burning pain in my legs. We had run a mile before turning around to go back home. I was getting tired and running too slow for my brother. He said that he was going to run ahead home, but I could not stop until I made it back. Naturally, once he was out of sight, I got a cramp in my side; I started walking.

It had been about ten minutes, and I was walking back home, still heaving. I was maybe a quarter mile away before I saw my brother walking up the street towards me. As he walked up to me he asked what was wrong. With my hands grasping my sides, I told him, "I have a cramp." Brett commanded me to start running. I shook my head and tried to breathe. "Well, if you're going to be such a bitch about it, you get to sprint home," he said. That I'd gotten him pissed off pushed me to start jogging. I didn't want him looking down on me. "What did I tell you? Sprint!" he shouted as he ran next to me. I picked up the pace, but he started pushing me. "You think you will be able to play football like this? You have to want it! I am not always going to be here to hold your hand!" His words hurt, and I felt ashamed of myself. I was ashamed that I was not stronger.

I rounded the corner to our street. Brett shouted, "This is it! Two hundred yards left. It is now or never. Know you can do it. Sprint!" With my eyes welling up and my chest tightening from the hatred and anger I felt, I began to push harder and harder. All I could do was put my head down and stare at my feet, willing them to move. I watched as the rhythm of my white shoes hitting the black pavement began to quicken. I was putting more ground between my brother and me. My legs felt like rubber beneath me. My thighs throbbed with each step. I had no idea how I was keeping my balance. Still I kept on pushing as Brett shouted, "Yes, Go!" I flew down the street to our house and collapsed on the front lawn. Lying on my back, looking up at the cloudless blue sky, I thought to myself, "I can't believe it! That jerk! My cramp is gone."

I, _____, am not a conscientious objector. What conscientious objector would join the army? I, _____, have read the above statement. Why do I need to put a check in a box signifying that I read it when I already signed and dated it? Unbelievable! I never

knew signing my life away would be such a process. I guess it's for the best. I suppose it would give me invaluable experience. Self-confidence I never had before. A strong head on my shoulders, and hell, it would keep me in shape. Maybe it would give me the ability to finally be able to kick Brett's ass.

He dragged me back out into the hot, muggy air that festers every August in Minnesota. He had me, by my shoe, in one hand and a football in the other. I had just opened the door to our house after our exhausting run, and been hit by a wave of cool air before he got me. As my face slid across the dry grass of our back yard, I thought to myself, "He would never do anything as corny as throw a football with me. What's going on? This just isn't like him. Mom must be behind this." He finally let me go and walked a couple of yards out in front of me. I got up and brushed the dust off my sweat-soaked shirt only to turn around to a perfect spiraling football being thrown into my gut. I wheezed as the air I so desperately needed began to escape from me, awed at how perfect that throw looked. Luckily, I caught the ball so I at least saved a little face, and I held the ball awkwardly with both hands. I was trying to rotate it to a position that didn't feel so foreign to my fingers. As I got distracted by all the little bumps on the surface of the ball, my brother asked, "Are you planning on throwing it back?" I first grumbled at his remark and then let out a long sigh because I knew what was about to happen. I lined up my ring finger with the ball's first lace, and then wrapped the rest of my hand around the leather surface. Then, in a motion I can only compare to throwing a baseball, I heaved it. It wobbled about in the air like a flopping fish, and hit my brother at his knees. Brett stood back up after catching it, disappointment in his eyes. He just threw it back, and we continued for a while in silence.

I, _____, have never used an illegal substance or drug. This is a little hypocritical. I know plenty of guys in the army who use drugs. I mean, my recruiter told me that if I'd done any of them, I should just check "no" anyway, and make sure they're out of my system come test time. *I, _____, have read and understand the homosexual conduct policy.* From what my brother tells me, army guys are the most homoerotic people he knows. *I, _____, have read and understand the injury policy.* Now that I think about it, I'm not afraid of death, yet I am afraid of getting seriously injured. I just feel that serving one's country is more important than an individual's life. If you're killed in the line of duty, then so be it. You did your job, and it was meant to be. But to lose a leg or an arm--I am not sure I could live with that. Ironically, if Brett were to be hurt, I would be fine and support him. But if he were to be killed, I do not know what I would do.

When the silence between us was too much to bear, my brother said, "So, Mom sent me out here to talk to you about high school, and some other stuff." I first thought to myself, "I knew it!" Then I wondered about what the ominous "other stuff" was. Brett again talked up how great football would be at the high school, and how hard school would be. He said, "Even the fat-ass linemen get all the girls they can handle," and "the entire family knows you're twice as smart as your sister and me, so we expect you to do better. You have to nut up and be a man and put up with all the bullshit." He eventually got into one of his classic rants. He told me, "When it comes to your future and indulging in something you shouldn't, drink! Even though our parents' habits have probably cursed the two of us to be alcoholics, drink! Your sister may be an evil, pot-smoking hippie, but you never want to be caught with that stuff." He caught the ball but paused before throwing it back. "Dad's never going to have this conversation with you, I may as well

tell you about the birds and the bees too.” It was at this moment I asked God why he was punishing me so, and I cringed at the idea of this conversation going further.

After he finished his rant about the horror of getting a girl pregnant he left me with three golden rules to live by: 1, play the game so you don’t get played; 2, never listen to our mother or sister; and 3, (too explicit to share). “Thanks for the great advice,” I muttered, but I couldn’t help but smile because only my brother would tell me something like that. As he threw the ball to me he said there was one more thing he needed to tell me, and as I caught the ball, still smiling, I simply asked, “What?”

“Well, you know I’m going off to fight overseas and everything. And, well, should I be hospitalized and fall into a coma, I left it up to you to decide when I should die.”

I stopped rotating the ball. I stared down at all its little bumps. I looked up at him while my fingers found their way to the laces. I wrapped my hand around the ball and I threw back a perfect spiral. We walked back inside.

So, I’ll join then. Brett did it! That’s an awful reason. No, I want to do this for my country and my family. I want to make them proud, but mostly I want prove to myself that I can do it. Oh, I should probably go running.

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, both foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, so help me God.

Sign here, it says. And I do.

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