

The previous day was a blur of activity. There were a few breaks, mainly for food, in an otherwise non-stop day. Running around the convention center, attending panels, grabbing quick snacks, meeting up with friends and meeting up with those friend's friends had consumed all my thoughts. It wasn't until he and I had escaped the city that I had a chance to dwell on the inevitable: I was really leaving. Leaving everything behind to go back to work a world away.

Noise from the car's tires on the road and body cutting through the humid air filled the cabin. Silence had settled between us as our remaining time together could be counted in double-digit minutes. I glanced at him and his face was stoic, hands clasped together in his lap. At least he wasn't crying yet, I thought somberly.

I checked my watch; plenty of time, so I kept to the speed limit and concentrated on driving. Maybe it would give us a couple more minutes together—even if it was spent in silence.

My two week vacation had been more than I had hoped for. Lazy days spent cuddling and napping, venomless back-and-forth banter, eating a home cooked meal together and even my first time catching fireflies, all in the first week. I smiled to myself, unaware of the too few miles remaining rolled by beneath us. We drove passed a large sign announcing our arrival at the airport ten minutes later and I frowned. I wasn't ready to leave.

I don't have a choice.

I've had plenty of practice at hiding my emotions in my time as a marine. There have been more farewells and tears shed because of my departures than I want to acknowledge. There have been losses during my time that I wish had never happened. Emotional suppression is a skill born of necessity and sociological expectation of how a man should act, but it only helps to internalize what needs and should be set free.

People are unloading their luggage and saying their own goodbyes as I pull the car up to the curb at the departures terminal. I don't need to look at his face to know he's doing his best to keep his composure. I can hear his quivering breath.

Muggy air washes over me when I open the door and gather my things; he's already out and at the trunk by the time I stand. I swallow with some difficulty because my throat has constricted. My sunglasses help to conceal my expression, and the water welling in my eyes, as I help put my bags on the curb. I double check the car and come back around to the curb, face-to-face with the harsh reality

that this is it.

Reality looks back at me with barely restrained tears.

I wrap my arms around him in a final embrace and he presses his face into my neck. Deep down inside I want to cry and, like all those other times, I am unable. The best I can do is blink what little liquid wells up and rub his back soothingly. A minute goes by before he leans back and looks up at me expectantly. I oblige and kiss him. I only let it last for a moment; I want to hold it, but part of me is still uncomfortable with the judging gazes of random strangers. Even if it's all in my head.

Saying goodbye has never been one of my strengths and this moment is no different. They always feel awkward to me and goodbyes with me generally last for a very long time. It will be a year before I see him again. I fret over my glasses hanging in the collar of my shirt when he squeezes me; I adjust them and hug him tightly in return. Even in times like this I worry about stupid shit. Conscious of the hyper vigilant airport security, I pull back from him. Neither of us wants this. I kiss him one last time. One final hug for the road.

I don't want to watch him leave and wave as I head into the air-conditioned terminal. The cool air is refreshing. Once inside I get my bearings and find my check-in counter. A sudden change of heart pulls me back to the entrance and I watch him pull away through the tinted glass doors. I hope he looks my way, but he doesn't. He wouldn't have been able to see me anyway. I know he's crying and I worry about him making the four hour trip home, alone.

The line to check-in is mercifully short when I reach it. When I'm second in line I almost lose my composure. My eyes start to water and the muscles in my throat tighten against my will, mouth pulling into a frown. I want to break down, fall to my knees and let all the tears go free. Tears that I held when the caskets, wrapped in American flags, carrying my brothers-in-arms were marched passed, draped in darkness, into the belly of a waiting C-130.

Tears I denied, again, when I stood holding my salute when another friend was marched away. Tears I narrowly contained when their grieving family's staggered past inches from me, the fallen's brother supporting his tortured grandmother, at the funeral ceremony after we'd gotten back home.

Now, a text message from him telling me he's crying, I wipe my eyes, put on a false face for the world and tell him I love him. I tell him I'll see him soon. It's the truth, but it feels like a lie. No tears crawl down my

cheeks.

The years I've spent away from friends, family and loves is starting to wear on me. You signed the dotted line, I tell myself as if it will comfort me. God—I wish I could cry until my soul is empty.

"Good afternoon, where are you flying today?" The woman behind the counter asks politely.

What is so fucking good about it, lady.