

# Joshua

a short story by madison grube

I was maybe seven years old when Joshua went to Iraq. I didn't even know he was going until he had left. And when he had, the words held little meaning. When you're seven years old, the whereabouts of unknown relatives lack importance.

I have few childhood memories of Joshua. We never made snowmen or played tag. He was more of a name that came up periodically between the clinks of forks at the dinner table. He was often mentioned in a dull way, with little interest. It was almost as if he was brought up only as a reminder.



I remember that both irritating and intriguing me. That Joshua and I shared a last name, I mean. We had met just once, it hadn't seemed right to share such a major aspect of my identity with a close to total stranger.

I knew very little of Joshua. What I knew from the christmas cards and our first and only meeting years before was that he was tall, much taller than I, and always had this goofy look on his face. He had a toothy smile and eyelids that drooped so severely that he looked upon looking One year, my father had chuckled something about Joshua having too much fun these days. He had dropped the subject quickly after I had asked why Joshua could play with pots and I couldn't.

The only face I had to match the name to came in the form of a tacky christmas card every year, containing the kind of picture that you would look at and instantly pity all who were involved. The kind where the whole family wears matching khakis and turtlenecks, their faces stained with forced smiles. I always felt uncomfortable looking at that card, like it had been sent to the wrong address, yet we had kept it to display anyway. But there it was. Addressed clearly in ink to my family, and signed from his of the same surname.

I had just turned five on September 11th of 2001. Five years old, yet I remember it like it was yesterday. Everyone says that, I'm sure. That doesn't make it any less true though.

On the day of, my father went to work in Manhattan, like he did every other day. I was in afternoon kindergarten, so I was not in school that morning. The footage played over and over and over again. I thought my mother would never stop crying. I remember drawing in my room that day, my mother downstairs, my brother in a high chair crying and pointing at the smoke that would be visible from my kitchen window for over a month.

Coloring with my crayons was therapeutic, to me. I drew and drew and drew, all day. My mom still has those drawings, all these years later. One in particular, she saved. It was a drawing of my mother and I in New York City. In the background was the statue of liberty, crying as she overlooked the twin towers, on fire.

I remember my mother's excitement upon finding it. "She's an artist!" she had exclaimed. She had then proceeded to call the relatives, the friends, anyone who would listen. She had bragged about her oh-so-talented daughter, how she was destined for fortune and glory. She had laid down all of her expectations of me when I was just five years old. I didn't want fortune. I didn't want glory.

**I was five years old.  
I wanted to be able to sleep at night.**



Each day leading up to christmas, my father would read off the list of cards we had received that day. Each name or surname would spark a distracted comment from my mother or father as to what they had been up to since the last christmas card. It wasn't a tradition, but a routine. It was a meaningless task on an assembly line, building the same meaningless parts to recreate the same day that yesterday had brought about.

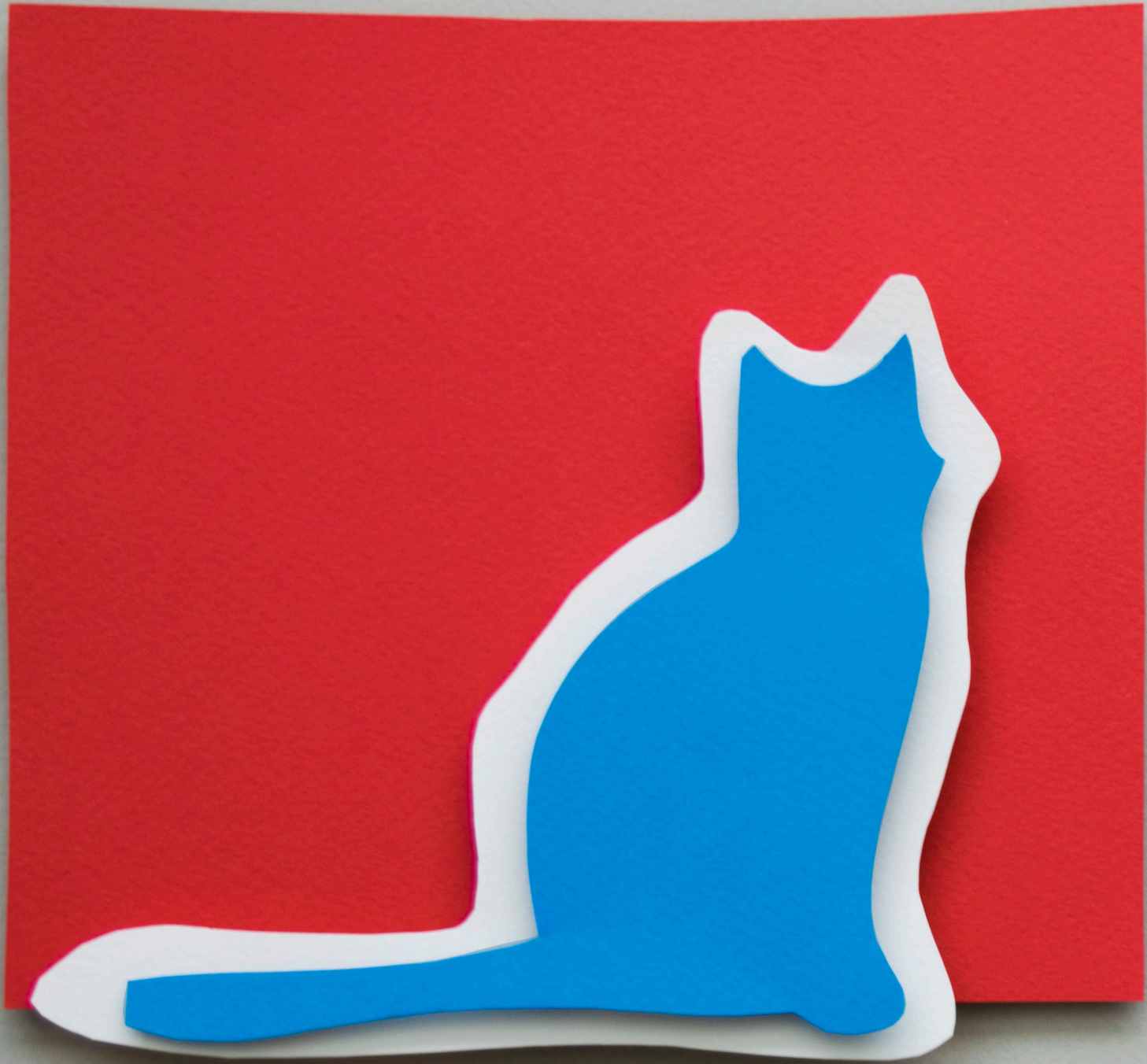
And every year when that ridiculous christmas card would arrive it would be me to ask my father how they were, Joshua and his family, I mean. The question was a standard, and the answer was equally so. They were either "fine" or "good". I never pushed for more details, though I desperately wanted him to expand. Often I wondered whether my father even talked to them enough to provide an expansion on how they really were.

But one year, the christmas I was seven years old, the answer was different. This year, my father snapped out of the constant distraction. He looked up at me carefully, calculated. He shook his head. He sighed.

I remember feeling the excitement of the change of pace. When you're seven years old, you live for moments like this. Moments where trends are broken. Moments where you begin to learn about the lives of mysterious family members. Moments where your father finally looks up from whatever is of utmost importance to talk to you.

**What was going on?  
Where were they?  
Were they coming  
for the holidays?**

This was when I had learned that Joshua had gone to Iraq. Strange, I remember thinking. We continued through the christmas cards.



I used to feel really guilty about even thinking about the subject of Joshua in Iraq, as if I wasn't qualified to worry or care. Who was he? It wasn't a question I could adequately answer. He was the cousin whom I had never really known. He was tall. He had a big, goofy smile and heavy eyes. He was one of the many faces displayed on the wall of my foyer during the month of December. That was the extent of my knowledge.

And somewhere there were people that recognized his existence for more than one measly month each year. To me he was just another face on the wall of the foyer during the month of December. Yet I found the threat of his absence terrifying. If Joshua didn't make it home from Iraq, I wouldn't miss him. He had no effect on my life, and I none on his. We were just two people who shared the same last name. It bothered me. He could die at any point and I would never even have known whether he was a cat person or a dog person.

**Just in case,  
I decided that  
he was a dog  
person.**





The first and only time I had met Joshua, I was five years old. It had been another dreaded family barbecue that I had tried unsuccessfully to get out of. I was pissed to be there. I sat in a corner and pouted. And when I was talked to, I made sure to voice exactly how pissed off to be there I was. You see, I didn't like change, or things that were different. And they were all so much older than me. The next youngest kids were hardly kids at all. They pronounced certain words differently as well, which I found confusing and kind of irritating, particularly when they showed such offense at being corrected. I was just trying to help.

And for whatever reason, they all seemed to think that their differences made them above everyone else. I didn't see how wrinkles or mispronunciation was a mark of superiority. There was only one who wasn't like the rest of them. And, you know exactly who it was. He still mispronounced words, but he was likable enough for me to overlook it. He had introduced himself to me like we were of equal standings, as if he were no different than any of my kindergarten friends, though he was considerably older and taller.

He shook my hand and said how nice it was to meet his cousin for the first time. It had been the first time I had smiled all day. We colored in my grandmother's backyard for hours, and for a while it looked as though this weird side of the family wasn't so weird after all. He had taken me to ice cream after that godforsaken barbecue. I had gotten chocolate, he had gotten vanilla.


**He had cried the whole way home.**



I had thought it was so odd at the time, that he was crying, I mean. Ice cream had had the opposite effect on me. I considered the possible reasons for his sudden opposition to ice cream. Maybe he had bitten his tongue. Maybe he had gotten brain freeze. Maybe they had given him mashed potatoes in a cone instead of vanilla ice cream. It wasn't until I started writing this story out one day did I begin to wonder if he had known his fate all along.

I asked my mother once why Joshua never came to visit me in the time between the ice cream and his draft. She shrugged her shoulders and turned to my father. "People like him," my father had said disapprovingly, "refuse to embrace change." If it had puzzled me then, it had puzzled me more once he had gone, and I had been left to contemplate whether life in the middle-east was an easier transition than a weekend with my family.

**I looked back and forth between my parents and decided that it probably was.**



You might be wondering whether Joshua ever made it home. You might be wondering whether or not I ever really got to know him, like I had wanted to so desperately. The unfortunate thing for you, my dear reader, is that there is not a straightforward answer to those questions. Neither can be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no,' because, in fact, although there is an argument that he did make it home, there's one that he didn't as well. Get what I'm saying? You see, we all act differently when put under circumstances which differ from our own personal 'normal.' When our standards are threatened, the animalistic nature within us bubbles to the surface. We begin to listen more to what our bodies tell us than our minds. Instincts. But which one makes us who we are? Should the true nature of a person be determined by our natural, animalistic qualities or our civilized, acquired ones? I don't have an answer for you.

But I can tell you that I did eventually get to know someone. His name was Joshua. And yes, we shared the same last name. But this Joshua who returned from Iraq wasn't the boy who wore khakis and turtlenecks. He wasn't the one who for some reason loved pots, or the only one on that wretched side of the family to treat me as an equal. These were the only things that I had known about my cousin. These little tidbits of information that I had picked up about him over the years were what made him more than just a name. So when he returned, lacking all that I had known him by, I mourned. My cousin had died.



I was 10 years old the second time I met Joshua. I hadn't been expecting the encounter when it took place, although I had been anxious to see him again. To make sure he was really still around. He had been sitting in our grandmother's living room when I arrived. I walked in slowly. I looked up at him. I smiled. He looked up. He held eye contact with me for merely a moment. He looked away.

I wondered if he remembered eating ice cream with me all those years ago.

Although I saw Joshua many times again after that, he was never my cousin again. I didn't even think about him for years. I refused to even acknowledge what few memories of him that I had. If you were to ask any of my friends today, they would tell you that they had never heard anything of Joshua prior to reading the beginning stages of this story. After all, it's always easier to pretend that something never happened than to face it.

**I'm no  
good at  
facing  
things.**

I'm not exactly sure why I decided to write this story when I did. It was a sudden decision, totally unplanned. One day, after many years, I just came home from school and couldn't get it out of my head. I had to write it. I had to write it because some things just have to be recorded to prevent them from being forgotten. If we do not remember the things that have made us who we are than we begin to take them for granted. They become stories conjured from the depths of our imaginations as opposed to our most sacred memories. Or perhaps they were always stories.

You see, Joshua was beginning to fade from my memory all together. And only recently, as I read the tale of another did I begin to dig up the story of my cousin. It was different, looking at it through older eyes, I mean. It was a different experience the second time. From then on I thought of Joshua frequently. I could hear how I wanted his story to sound, I could feel what I wanted to evoke. But I had no idea of how to get it down. Something so massive surely could not fit on any amount of paper. I tried many times to write it, and each time the result was an endless drabble of ramblings that never seemed to go anywhere. "Proof-read it, Madison," my mother had told me. "Think about the objective: where is it going?"

I didn't have an answer for her though. How could it go anywhere on paper if it had gone nowhere in my memory? There wasn't an earth-shattering epiphany. There wasn't a meaning to pull from it. There wasn't a reason why it all happened, but it did. Believe it or not, I once had a cousin named Joshua. He really wore khakis and turtlenecks. He really fought for nothing at all in Iraq.

That's what this is about. That's my objective. It's about nothingness. Emptiness. The lack of poetry that separates reality from our wildest fantasies. "Ah," my mother had sighed. "You wrote a war story." She's wrong though. It's not a war story. It's no tragedy. It's hardly philosophical.

**It's the story of  
a little girl. A  
little girl named  
Madison, who lost  
her imaginary  
friend.**

