

2021 Senior Poetry Winner

Command & Conquer

by Michael Jad Cheaito

My dad and my big brother used to play *Command and Conquer* on the kitchen counter.
And I could watch, stooped below, catching big, violent men making moves and invading.
And as my dad would talk strategy, Ali would nod his head.
Mommy wore a durag
And blew out the candles on birthdays.
She'd make it to 40, and 41, and the tumour would go away.
She always chose kisses
And told me to love my brother.
And she'd ask if I wanted to eat bacon or not, because she believed I had a right to *choose* faith.
And as big, violent men applauded and sometimes yelled,
I got good at watching.
I'd watch *Lord of the Rings*, and video games, swords and goblins and grand dragons.
Ali never flinched, but sometimes, I got a little scared.
Ali passed down some strategy,
Like when to pivot or make a noise – when to strike or when to hide.
And Mommy learned a little, too, because when the tumour came back, she'd say things like
“I love you and I'm doing well.” And she always had a smile.
Dad must have forgotten what he taught, because sometimes he slipped out,
“Jad, I don't know what to tell you.”
So I got floats and learned to swim, I learned how to talk fast, how to make friends,
And how to sit politely in a waiting room.
I got better at all the little things
Like how to decode a smile, or walk on the tips of my toes. I'd ask questions like,
“Is Santa real?”
And
“Did the chicken come first?”

And Ali would say, without a flinch, that it was the egg, that fat men in red didn't come down chimneys,

And that God couldn't be real.

I got good at catching fists with my face and clawing out people's ears.

I practised the dirty tactics

And I'd watch, because you learned things

Like how Dad always had a beer in his hand, and how one night

He drank whisky.

And Ali never cried.

Even at the funeral, he would just nod his head

And practise the artful tricks

Of deflection and espionage.

And when I passed by the casket, I thought to give a kiss,

But I kept my eyes dry

And firm

And talked smart

And little,

Because it's not keen to give things away.

My dad and my big brother used to play *Command and Conquer*. If you knew how to watch, then there was a lot to learn.

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