

Stiff

by **Amy Halloran**

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The air was crowded with wooden soldiers, standing shoulder to shoulder, life-sized and fully armed. Deadly lead paint chips fell off the carved wooden totems that looked like nothing more than cigar store Indians and felt just as politically incorrect.

WAR IS FOR THE BIRDS, thought the mother, weaving her way through the symbols of her times. SUCH A SCENE, she sighed, AND IT IS ONLY MONDAY MORNING. WHERE TO BEGIN?

MUST GET RID OF THE SOLDIERS.

She opened the north windows and lifted the screens. Oldest child was at school. Crawling baby was safe, quite asleep in crib - sound of breathing piped in by monitor proved his presence even in his absence, proved his life.

WHAT PROVES MY LIFE? wearily wondered the mother as she tipped soldier after soldier out the window. NO SMALL TASK.

The mother is buff, has a gym habit she cannot kick, but still, six feet of wood is six feet of wood - heavy, and awkward to tip out a window. It's not like pouring off stinky flower-water and letting dead petals and collapsed stems fall to the ground.

The woman heaved the totems out the window, catching splinters in her palms. She filled the space between her house and her neighbors to the north, a gangway five feet wide, with a layer of soldiers four feet deep. The neighbors would have hell to say about her efforts, but she didn't care. She didn't get along with the people anyway; it wasn't like she could save relations by keeping the soldiers indoors and crowding her.

Besides, she could take the children to the backyard through the gangway to the south. Sure, there was the problem of the lead paint floating downhill and into that backyard with the rain, but boy oh boy, it felt good to get those soldiers out of the kitchen.

NOBODY WANTS TO TALK ABOUT WAR, EVEN WHEN IT'S STARING YOU IN THE FACE, the woman thought, shaking her head in dismay. BEST TO KEEP THE BEAST REMINDERS OUT OF FAMILY SIGHT. OTHERWISE, WHO KNOWS, THE HUSBAND MIGHT START RAGING AGAIN AT DINNER, ABOUT THE MID-EAST AND HOW COME THE PEOPLE THERE COULDN'T BE AS COMPLACENT AS THE PEOPLE IN THE MID-WEST WHEN IT CAME TO RESOURCES.

The husband got very angry these days, maybe because of all the soldiers

surrounding him at home. With them gone, perhaps dinner would be calm.

WHAT SHOULD I MAKE? SOMETHING VEGETARIAN TO KEEP THE SNAKE (her husband) QUIET?

Our heroine sighed and swallowed another cup of coffee, tummy rumbling. Her diet consisted of coffee and the vapors she in- and exhaled, reviewing and reviewing her situation. Who would want to eat with all those poopy diapers and pukey clothes around? And the six-year old joking constantly about the toilet? She was glad there was more air to swallow with the soldiers gone.

The woman looked out the window and admired her work. The dull-sharpedge of a black bayonet aimed at the sky as if the sun were an enemy. In the kitchen, the weapon had threatened a light fixture. The room felt bigger now, emptied of its burden. The woman tweezed out her splinters then her eyebrows. She brushed her hands against each other and stuck her tongue out at the old wooden soldiers.

WHERE DID YOU COME FROM? she wondered. WHO INVITED YOU?

First there was one soldier, then another, then some mornings she woke up and there were ten more of them, as if there were a kingdom of lost wooden soldiers that needed housing and her address was posted on the internet. The soldiers looked like they came from the same army; there was a similar folk art chisel to their faces, which were painted the same shade of peach. The soldiers wore white straps across their chests, LIKE RED COATS FROM THE REVOLUTION, LIKE PROMISES CROSSED WITH A FINGER OVER THE HEART, SHOULDER TO SHOULDER.

The woman sighed, chewing and spitting out another gulp of air. Even with the soldiers removed, the room was stuffy. The air remained stiff with indifference, full of soldiers turning their shoulders, cold, away from her and her petty concerns.

She was defensive about their dismissiveness. Didn't she fight the wars of childhood, battling bacteria and chaos with the help of washing machines and vacuums? The soldiers fought the sky and stared with unseeing eyes at the clouds, ignoring the problems she'd cast them from. The problems stayed like dogs, obedient and smack dab in the middle of the room.

The baby stirred in his sleep. His brother would be home from school in an hour. The list of groceries begged to be filled, like the gas tank. The husband would be home soon enough, spitting his venom at her as if she were the reason they needed cheap oil, as if she, woman personified, were the root of each evil.



About the author:

Amy Halloran lives in upstate New York with her husband, two sons and six chickens. She is working on a variety of writing projects for kids and adults.

