

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2006

Private Alex

My cousin Alex was always strangely private. When he was small, we would play hide-and-seek. He hid in strange, tiny places: in the cabinet under the bathroom sink, in my dresser drawer, or on the bottom shelf of my mother's linen closet. Soon, he began to hide even when we weren't playing. It seemed he just wanted time to himself. Even as a four-year-old, he knew what he needed. He would disappear, then his mother, our aunt, would be frantic, worried he'd wandered away. We'd search all over my mother's house, or his mother's house, and finally find him, our special package, curled up and napping.

As a young man, Alex needed a special room of his own. His bedroom wasn't private enough--it was too close to his sister across the hall, too close to his parents. His parents' basement became his private domain, where the whirring of his computers kept him company. "An angry warlock lives down there," his father once said to me, and we laughed. Alex guarded his space. He made you knock. You felt special if he invited you down. For me, he'd clear a space and give me room for my schoolwork. "You can sit here," Alex said. He pulled out wires and plugged in my laptop, showed me how things worked.

Alex called me recently from college, a nineteen-year-old freshman, major undeclared, handsome scholarships in his pocket. He had grown into a sweet and gentle young man, always respectful toward me and my sister. For years, he lived with us for a few weeks over the summers. We thought we knew him as well as anyone could. We thought our relationship was special.

On the phone, Alex told me he had special news. This was something he'd kept private from us all, from his parents and sister, from my parents who helped raise him, from my sister, from me--his cousins and sisters of the heart.

"I'm enlisting," he informed me. "I want to hold a gun."

"But why? Aren't you throwing everything away?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"This is my decision."

His only confidante had been the Army recruiter. The recruiter had told Alex that his family wouldn't understand.

I thought, We've lost him.

When he was a little boy, Alex spent many nights at my parents' house. One time, when

he was only two, before his little sister was born, he spent a night in my parents' room. My mother made him a small bed with blankets next to her on the floor. Late in the night my mother woke and he was gone. For two hours our family searched. We checked all of his favorite hiding spots--under the sink, in the linen closet. When we found the front door unlocked, we were certain he had opened the door and wandered out, that he was lost. Without hope, my mother looked beneath her bed. Alex had slipped under the bed-skirt and slept through the whole ordeal, safe--unaware of our agony.