

Always on My Mind

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

You Know When the Men Are Gone,
by Siobhán Fallon, Amy Einhorn Books:
G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011.



On May 6, 2011, a letter to *The Kansas City Star* announced that the day was Military Spouse Appreciation Day. “Take a moment to thank spouses for their quiet service,” the letter said, “moving often, adjusting kids to new schools, and being bastions of support for their service members without asking for anything in return, even when they are worn down by the costs of war.” Having just read Siobhán Fallon’s strong debut collection, *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, I was struck by how few writers had plowed this neglected field and how much, it turns out, there is to say that is illuminating and original. Military families are forced to make complicated arrangements, and hovering over spouses both at home and at war is the debilitating fear of infidelity.

In these eight well-shaped stories, Fallon does not limit herself to the wives. She is equally adept at the men, and we are invited into a world of anxiety and loneliness that affects all military spouses. Her description of deployment is in itself a quick course in a soldier’s uncomfortable life, and his longing. Left behind, the women in these stories must make their own accommodations. The title story opens with a description of Fort Hood that offers a good introduction to Fallon’s style, characterized by the apt detail, with Chekhovian restraint, economy, and flow.

[W]hen the soldiers deployed . . . the base shifted from a world dominated by camouflage uniforms to one of brightly colored baby carriages and diaper bags, Mommy & Me meetings at the First Cavalry Museum, women on pastel picnic blankets lounging on the parade field and sharing cinnamon rolls. . . . [T]he retreat still sounded at five o’clock each evening, blared

through speakers across the entire base, and the women stopped their moving cars and got out, stood in the streets with their hands over their hearts, facing the flag just as their husbands would have done, until the bugle's song was over.

Later, through the tissue-thin walls of military housing, narrator Meg gets to know another Army wife, a native of Kosovo, whose behavior as well as her English are a challenge.

In "The Last Stand," disabled Specialist Kit Murphy lists for himself what he is grateful for in light of his recent deployment: matched socks, dry towels, clean mirrors, all provided by his wife who now wants a separation. "Inside the Break" (winner of a *New Letters* fiction award) follows Hawaiian-born Kailani, married to a Latino soldier, who struggles to resist the gossip from the Latina wives obsessed with a woman working in their husbands' unit in Iraq. So thick are the rumors and misinformation that Lailani commits an "infidelity" of a different order.

Fallon introduces us to the extended impact of a soldier's "reentry shock," returning home, and to the touching plight of a young widow who misses her husband's touch. "Camp Liberty" is the standout story of an investment banker who joins up after 9-11. He finds his new life in Iraq much to his liking until the disappearance of his female interpreter. Most unsettling is the tale "Leave," where Chief Warrant Officer Nick Cash uses a surreptitious 10-day leave to break into his own house to spy on his wife.

The fear of loss that haunts these characters has many faces. The men often fear loss of support and family when all they have otherwise is a hot tent in Iraq, where death is invisible and everywhere. Meanwhile the women's lives are on hold, and their most significant act is waiting. The reader comes to realize that few things on earth are as unnatural as a year-long military deployment. "Without the men," Fallon writes, "there is a sense of muted silence, a sense of muted life."

Fallon has achieved the *trifecta* of memorable fiction: convincing characters, in original and quietly daunting situations, and delivered in finely tuned prose. These are immensely satisfying stories.