

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

101



HARTLEY STEVENS

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A Living-In-The-Country Short

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By

Hartley Stevens

My oldest son recently became a man. Not because of his age, which is twenty, but because he finished boot camp with the Marines at Parris Island, South Carolina. For an entire year prior to signing up he and I struggled with the concept of responsibility. He was fired from three jobs—as a WalMart buggy return specialist, then from an aluminum welding shop and last by Publix, a chain of grocery stores in our home Florida. During that same year after high-school and before the Marines, all he was good at was pecking away on his iPhone. I didn't consider this a high quality skill.

After the first three weeks of boot camp we were allowed to send and receive written letters, meaning old-school, pen and ink letters. His mother was a champ and wrote more than five every week. I tried to send uplifting snippets and short stories about life at home. We were ecstatic when we received his first reply. Of course, it was only directed towards Mama. Still, I read the letter too and my heart swelled.

Over a month passed and we received one letter each week. After we read these aloud at the dinner table, I took them to my home office and read them again slowly and with great

concentration and emotion. My boy was becoming a man. I was a soldier myself twenty-five years earlier and a connection with my son grew through those letters.

In each letter I read, I noticed a coded entry at the end of many sentences. He would tell us about a particularly difficult task he'd completed, or the intense yelling and break-down-build-up strategy of the drill instructors, or the difficulties of living with sixty other trainees. Behind each of these stories was the code "101."

As I said before, I was a soldier, I knew military code and I understood the need to cloak some of the words in your letters home. The drill instructors were known to rip your writing from your hand and read it aloud to the entire platoon just for the hell of it. Any complaining usually resulted in extended, horrible consequences for the entire training unit. But I didn't recognize "101".

This went on for eight or nine weeks—Boot Camp for Marines is thirteen weeks long. I was constantly assuring his mother that the boy was on the right track and he was progressing. Many boys were sent home, he wasn't. I didn't want to further distress my wife. She was consumed with his well-being and could hardly stand the idea of his suffering.

I researched, I Googled, I spoke with friends from my military past to divine the meaning of "101". In my letters back I never mentioned the code, I didn't want the DI's to make life harder on him. Subsequent letters contained more and more of the code. I worried. I sat in my office and fretted over the letters. I wanted him to come to ground, to be a man and finish what he started. I knew he was trying to tell me something—something important. But what?

"101." What did it mean?

Week ten of the training approached, the hardest of all, but I knew that after doing so much he would complete Marine Basic. Still, the “101” code was ever-present and I hadn’t figured it out. I reserved two hotel rooms for the graduation. The grandparents were coming as well as his younger brother. We made grand plans for his return party and invited the whole family.

The letters kept coming, always only addressed to “Mom” as it should be, although we were all meant to read them. But the code, I was convinced, was only for me, and I couldn’t figure it out. I scoured his every word for more meaning.

In the twelfth week a letter arrived, we read it together, then as always I went to the office. My distress was high and the feeling of letting him down made me feel both futile and furious. I even tried using a magnifying glass, reading the text to see if he was encrypting something. Nothing.

I’d had it, couldn’t take the not knowing anymore. I burst from the office and approached my wife. She saw the conflict on my face.

I told her, “I’ve been reading these letters for three months now. I don’t want you to get upset, but I believe our son has been sending us—sending *me*—a coded message and I don’t know what it is. I’ve asked for help from everyone who understands code, but no one knows. I’ve let him down.”

Different from me, she’s a warm, flexible, content human. She said, “I didn’t see any code, babe. Show me.”

I gave her the latest letter. “See? It’s ‘101’, babe. I don’t know what it means, but I’m sure it has significance.”

She read a couple of lines of the letter, took off her glasses and pointed at the code. “Are you talking about this?”

I was more relieved than I can say. Finally, I’d at least shown her the code and even if she was upset, I was prepared.

“Yes. Thank God you see it, too. I’ve been in anguish for months trying to understand what he’s saying. I’m sorry if this upsets you.”

“You’re talking about this?” She began to smile.

“Yes, yes, hell yes. It’s been in every letter from the beginning. I can’t figure it out, I’ve really tried and I need you to know that. Do *you* know? Do you know what it means?”

My wife stood up and wrapped her arms around me. She hugged me tight, then stepped back.

“You really don’t know, do you?”

“No. And, I’m sorry for letting you down. He’s trying to tell us something.”

She laughed, pushing my shoulder to see if I was kidding, then she laughed some more. I didn’t like that at all. I wanted that code—I wanted to grab her and make her understand how much I *needed* that code.

She touched my face, understanding. “It’s not a code, babe. And it’s not ‘101’. It’s LOL. It’s text-speak, and it means ‘Laughing Out Loud’. It’s a good thing, a funny thing.”

Humans – *parents*, of Earth. Take note.

The End

Before You Go...

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