

He was laid-back and blond, a surfer dude in manner if not literal truth, a California kid who believed a double-double burger from In-N-Out was nature's perfect food. Five foot nine and stocky, he was known in high school for decent golf, mediocre football, better grades, and outrageous pranks. He was sentimental, even sappy, a romantic who was confident in his charms. When he wanted to take a girl he hardly knew to the senior prom, he armed himself with a dozen roses, drove to her house, and asked her in person. (She said yes.) Most of all, he was mischievous. On days off from school, he and a friend would cure their boredom by wandering the mall or the shops of their hometown, competing to see how many stores would kick them out. When all else failed, a game of one-on-one basketball in the sporting goods department usually did the trick. Perhaps his most famous high school prank was the time he sneaked in before marching band practice and swapped a porn movie for the videotape of the band's most recent performance. The band director fumbled with the VCR for the longest fifteen seconds of her life.

But there was another side to Todd J. Bryant, West Point class of 2002: He had practically been born in uniform. Though he was born on January 14, 1980, the tale of Todd's life had truly begun two decades earlier,

when his mother, Linda, visited the United States Military Academy on a family vacation. The year was 1959, the height of the Cold War, not even two years after Sputnik. Linda was eleven, a small-town Indiana girl, daughter of conservative and patriotic parents. As she walked the gray stone campus on the banks of the Hudson River north of New York City, she instantly fell in love. There was something so honorable and compelling about West Point—the tradition, the uniforms, the utter crispness of the place. It moved her deeply. How wonderful it would be, Linda thought, to one day stand as part of the long gray line of West Point graduates.

Seventeen years would pass before the American service academies admitted women, and so when Linda went home to Indiana, she limited herself to collecting military memorabilia. She grew up, went to high school in a class that included future vice president Dan Quayle, and earned a degree from Indiana University. Still, she thought about the military. She had high school friends who had died in Vietnam, and she felt that as an American she was in their debt. When the Air Force started commissioning women as regular officers in the 1970s, she joined up. She married a fellow officer, Larry Bryant, and they served together for more than a decade.

She loved the military life as much as she had hoped, but it all came to an end when she started having children. Especially after Todd was born, Linda had trouble losing her pregnancy weight. Her annual evaluations dripped with sarcastic comments and faint praise about the truly admirable effort she was making to slim down to military standards. She was passed over for promotion, and by the mid-1980s, when her husband left active duty for a civilian job at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California, the writing was on the wall. She cried as she turned in her military ID card, and as she scraped the Department of Defense parking sticker off her car.

TODD, THE YOUNGEST of the three Bryant kids, grew up in a five-bedroom house on a cul-de-sac in the desert suburbs an hour east of Los Angeles. He and his sister, Tiffany, went to school an hour away, near Pasadena, the Rose Bowl, and their parents' work. It was a long commute but a good life.

Riverside County was right-wing California, flush with military retirees and civilians working in the defense industry; Linda and Larry fit right in. Their kids grew up understanding that it was important to serve in the armed forces, to repay their country for the freedoms they enjoyed. Barely three years after Linda left the Air Force, there was a Bryant back in uniform. Tim, Todd's big brother, nine years older than Todd was, enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve and went off to college on a Naval ROTC scholarship.

Then it was Tiffany's turn. Pretty and blond, she had towered over Todd for most of their childhood, and tagged him with the teasing nickname Poco, Spanish for "Little." But in truth, Tiffany thought of herself as more of a second mother to Todd than a sister. Nearly three years older than Todd, she was trendy and rebellious, about as unmilitary as could be imagined. Convincing her even to spend two years part-time in the National Guard, Linda and Larry thought, would be a major accomplishment.

But again, the subtle lessons sank in. Even if Linda and Larry never recalled saying it explicitly, their kids understood that military service, especially as a commissioned officer, was among the highest positions one could aspire to. Tiffany came home from high school one day talking about enlisting in the reserves. She also mentioned wanting to study architecture in college, or civil engineering.

"You know," Linda said, "the number one civil engineering school in the country is West Point."

"What's West Point?" Tiffany asked.

Linda was incredulous. How could her daughter not know about the world's greatest military academy?

United Air Lines had a special over the July Fourth weekend that year, \$60 or \$70 each way, direct from Ontario Airport in California to Newark. Linda, Tiffany, and Todd flew out on the red-eye. They drove straight from the airport to the academy, the first time Linda had been on campus since her childhood visit thirty-five years before.

In later years, Tiffany and her mother would remember things differently. Linda would recall that after a daylong tour, her daughter stood apart from her brother and mother on the academy's storied parade

ground, known as the Plain. “Okay,” Linda recalled her announcing. “This is where I’m going.” Tiffany recalled being much harder to convince. Regardless, she applied, and though she did not get in at first, the academy offered her a sort of tryout, a year at the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School in New Jersey, to see if she could get her grades up to West Point standards. Tiffany thrived at Prep. She felt she’d had a much stricter upbringing than many of her peers, and despite all the Army discipline, she felt freer at the Prep School than she ever had in her life. At the end of the year, she was admitted to West Point as a member of the class of 2000.

TODD HAD BEEN fixated on Notre Dame since he was a kid. His bedroom was decorated with Fighting Irish wallpaper, and a football signed by Coach Knute Rockne rested on his bookshelf. Some of his high school football teammates had even nicknamed him Rudy, after the title character in a 1993 movie about a low-talent, high-desire Notre Dame football player. Though his parents figured Todd would probably apply for an ROTC scholarship like his older brother in the Marines, they also presumed his path would travel through South Bend, Indiana.

But then Todd visited Tiffany at West Point for a weekend during her freshman year—her “plebe” year. She loved it there, and Todd could see why: There was just something amazing about the place. It represented a challenge. *I can do this*, he thought to himself.

“That’s where I’m going,” he told his parents when he got back to California.

“What?” Linda replied. “West Point?” She was truly surprised. “What about Notre Dame?”

“Forget it.”

Still a high school junior, Todd enlisted in the Army Reserve and went through basic training at Fort Sill in Oklahoma the summer before his senior year. He wrote letters home to a girlfriend, waxing on about how grown-up he felt at seventeen, and wondering what it would be like if the United States ever went to war again. By the time he came home to California at the end of the summer, he had slimmed down and was in the best physical

shape of his life. He broke 1500 on his SATs and banged out his West Point applications.

Do you have a part-time job? the form asked.

“Yes,” Todd wrote with evident pride. “I am a private in the United States Army Reserve.” That was a big part of his identity now. He even wore his dress blue enlisted soldier’s uniform to the prom later that year.

What do you see yourself doing ten years from today?

“As a captain in the United States Army, I expect I will be commanding an armored cavalry unit.”

Why do you want to attend a U.S. service academy?

“I seek the opportunity to protect the freedoms we cherish,” Todd wrote. “And if need be, to fight and die for my country.”

Todd’s course was set. His congressman sponsored him. West Point accepted him. He didn’t apply anywhere else.

TODD BRYANT AND HIS CLASSMATES in the West Point class of 2002 were the heirs apparent to a military in crisis. In the wake of Vietnam, the leaders of the first army in American history to lose a war faced a stark strategic choice. They could study the war intently, learning and applying its lessons so they would never be caught flat-footed again. Or, they could decide that Vietnam was simply the product of a strange confluence of unfortunate geography, misguided tactics, and a lack of political will at home: an unnerving episode, but unlikely ever to be repeated. With a few notable exceptions, the leadership of the late-twentieth-century U.S. military chose the latter, more comfortable course. The Army set aside its Vietnam-style missions against insurgents and guerrillas, and instead prepared almost exclusively to fight the hordes of Soviet tanks that they expected would one day invade western Europe.

Most of the West Point class of 2002 had been born in 1979 or 1980; while they slept as infants in their cribs, two events unfolded that would profoundly affect their lives. The first of these was the 444-day Iranian hostage crisis, which began in November 1979; the second was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the following month. Turmoil in the Middle East

was a dire threat, and President Jimmy Carter quickly announced the U.S. policy that would stay in place for a generation: Any attempt to gain control of the Persian Gulf would be treated as an assault on America's vital interests and would be "repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

When Todd and his peers were in grade school, the Berlin Wall came crashing down, and the Soviet Union broke up. The great invasion of Europe never came. But in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the Army used the tanks and tactics it had developed to fight the Soviets to annihilate Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army in a hundred hours of one-sided desert combat. In its wake, the ghosts of Vietnam were finally exorcised, and the Army's planning seemed vindicated. America stood more than equal to all rivals. There were dangers in the world to be sure, but they appeared inchoate. The biggest challenge the U.S. Army faced seemed to be simply figuring out where the next military threat might come from.

THE DEAL AT WEST POINT IS THIS: a taxpayer-funded, four-year college education in exchange for five years of service as an officer on active duty in the Army, and three more in the reserves. Like their peers at the Naval and Air Force Academies, West Point cadets pay no tuition, no room or board. The academy touts the education it provides as being on a par with the finest universities in the country. Most applicants in the class of 2002 had top grades and impressive extracurricular activities, and were the kind of kids who could have chosen Harvard, Yale, or any elite college. Of twelve thousand applicants, 1,246 were admitted. There were team captains and Eagle Scouts, leaders and academics. More than one hundred of the new cadets who took their oaths with Todd on the academy football field in the early summer of 1998 were ranked first or second in their high school classes, and fully three-quarters had graduated in the top fifth. They were an accomplished, impressive group.

On the whole, cadets were likely to be the sons and daughters of alumni, or at least to have grown up in families with a tradition of military service, and in that respect they reflected American society as a

whole. In the era of the all-volunteer Army, the common measure of civic responsibility had shifted. A great gulf had opened between those who served in the military and those who didn't. Americans no longer believed they had to serve to be good citizens. Instead, they simply had to "support the troops," whatever that might mean. As the class of 2002 arrived, West Point was grappling with how to remain relevant in that environment, in a post-Cold War world with a smaller Army and no obvious international adversary. How could the academy keep a steady supply of America's best high school graduates streaming through its gates?

The academy hired a public relations firm in New York City, and reporters and filmmakers were welcomed to campus. When Todd Bryant and his classmates sat nervously in the bleachers of the football stadium on Reception Day in 1998, listening to welcoming speeches and taking their first orders, a few of the people among them were actually incognito actors playing cadets in a movie. West Point's top generals even convinced the editors of *Rolling Stone* to do a story on the academy. The article was the longest the magazine had ever published.

As it happened, the academy looked on the class of 2002 with special favor: Its graduation would coincide with the two hundredth anniversary of West Point's founding, and the cadets' arrival inaugurated a four-year opportunity to mold the academy's image. The bicentennial class was constantly touted as the new face of West Point, linking two centuries of tradition with a bright American future. As a result of all the attention, the class of 2002 was quickly nicknamed the Golden Children by the envious cadets ahead of them. They were celebrated at every turn, the upperclassmen complained, but the only thing special about them was the year they were born.

THE FIRST SUMMER and first year at West Point are legendarily tough. The system was designed to disorient new cadets, to make them feel "a little like Dorothy did when she landed in Oz," in the words of the academy commandant, a one-star general named John Abizaid. New cadets were allowed to speak only when spoken to, and then only with one of four scripted responses: "Yes, sir"; "No, sir"; "No excuse, sir"; or "Sir, I do not understand."

Todd and his new classmates were like actors now in all the classic military movie scenes: Long periods of standing at attention. Sixty-second buzz cuts at the cadet barbershop. Upperclassmen in starched uniforms, imitating the Marine Corps drill instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*. The new cadets were made to look uniformly foolish on the first day, issued and quickly dressed in gray West Point T-shirts, black shorts, calf-length socks, and dress shoes. Each wore a light blue note card around his or her neck—a USMA Form 2-176—with a checklist of stations, as if the new cadets were kindergarteners who couldn't be expected to remember their home addresses or phone numbers. One by one, they made it through the stations—"ID Photo"; "Lunch Meal"—as unsmiling upperclassmen unceremoniously checked them off, subtly reinforcing their new status. The new cadets never touched the cards or opened their mouths.

By early morning on Day 2, they were doing push-ups and sit-ups with their squads in formation. In Army speak, working out was "PT"—"physical training"—and besides keeping the new cadets in shape, it provided a healthy outlet for stress and anxiety. The new cadets marched, ran, camped, worked, memorized, and sweated. Most of all they followed, for a fundamental precept of "America's premier leadership school," as West Point humbly touted itself, was that one could never dream of being able to lead before learning to take direction.

Summer gave way to fall and then winter, and for the first-year cadets the days became a blur, a nonstop regimen of more academic assignments than could likely be done in a day, coupled with still more PT. Cadets who screwed up badly enough faced a time-honored punishment: marching in uniform for hours, rifles cradled across their shoulders. But while tradition ran deep, some things had evolved. Just before Todd and his peers arrived, West Point had instituted a series of reforms so sweeping that they were referred to simply as "the Changes." "Demanding but not demeaning" was General Abizaid's catchphrase. A member of the West Point class of 1973 and a combat veteran of the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, Abizaid was a different kind of officer. After the academy, he had studied at Harvard and in Jordan, and he spoke Arabic. (Abizaid played down his fluency in later years, but he was certainly among the few U.S. officers of

his time who knew his *as-salaam alaikum* from his *inshallah*.) He had a reputation for modern thinking and new ideas, and under his reign, much of the hazing, meanness, and abuse that had long been part of West Point life were gone. Creature comforts that would have brought scorn and punishment in years gone by were now officially sanctioned. Cadets could watch movies on computers in their rooms, for example, and had cell phones in their barracks. The older classes and some alumni grumbled that the Corps of Cadets had gone to hell. But as they worked their way through their first three years at the academy, the class of 2002 believed they were being better prepared for success in the Army than their predecessors, who had trained as much for the idiosyncrasies of West Point as for real war.

TIFFANY BRYANT GRADUATED from the academy in 2000 and was stationed in Korea, and so when Todd had to pick an Army internship a year later, just before his senior (“firstie”) year, he put in for a U.S. base near the Demilitarized Zone, forty miles north of Seoul. Why not let the Army pay for a trip to visit his sister? he reasoned. In less than a year he would be commissioned as a second lieutenant, and he still planned to serve in “armor,” as a tank commander, just as he had written in his West Point application. It struck him as the perfect assignment, in one of the real war-fighting branches of the Army, at the heart of the action. Plus, you rode into battle. Todd wasn’t a big fan of PT, and he absolutely hated running. In a tank unit, he reasoned, who needed to run five miles a day?

But if he was certain about branching armor, Todd was no longer sure what he wanted in the long term. Though West Point had traditionally prepared cadets for twenty-year careers as Army officers, its official mission statement now proclaimed that graduates were expected to perform “a lifetime of selfless service to the nation.” The language provided a moral escape clause, and cadets were quick to recognize that there were other ways to serve. Todd often spoke about his dream of one day serving in Congress, or even running for governor of his beloved California. But he also loved history, and he imagined that after his five-year active duty

obligation, he might teach high school and coach football. Sometimes he even thought that his true calling was stand-up comedy. Growing up in Southern California, he'd been a child model and actor, and had appeared as an extra on TV shows like *Family Ties* and *Beverly Hills 90210*.

But the answer to the question of what form his service might finally take lay in the far distant future; in the meantime, Todd was looking forward to the real Army. West Point, the joke went, offered a free, quarter-million-dollar education, shoved up your ass a nickel at a time. Todd complained constantly, and he was fond of saying the view of the academy he looked forward to most was the one he'd see in the rearview mirror after graduation. But it was obvious to everyone who knew Todd that he admired the place. Yes, his mother could drive him batty with her exuberant devotion to West Point and all things military, but he had come to love its tradition and honor every bit as much as she did. And he had made friends who were as close as any he could imagine.

In his final year now, Todd was rooming with Tim Moshier, a tall, gentle, quiet cadet who had grown up in a suburb of Albany and who towered over Todd by at least eight inches. Tim was a good student and a talented writer, but he preferred subjects like science and engineering, in which mathematical certainties could be attained. He was still very much a kid, with large, expressive eyes and a broad smile that masked his natural shyness. His friends teased him regularly about his affinity for sitcoms and his insistence on watching the teen drama *Dawson's Creek* every Tuesday.

West Point divided its cadets into regiments, and again into companies, each carefully filled to reflect the statistical diversity of the academy as a whole. Todd and Tim were assigned to Company D, 1st Regiment. Go back forty years and D-1 had been "Dogshit-One," reputed to have the meanest upperclassmen and toughest officer-instructors. But the academy was a little more family friendly now, and D-1 was known simply as the Ducks. Traditionally, classes "scrambled," meaning cadets were reassigned to new companies at the end of their second year. But in a rare show of democracy, West Point had put the usual practice to a vote for the class of 2002. Overwhelmingly, the cadets had preferred to remain in their cur-

rent companies, so Todd and Tim had lived with the same group of friends for three years. They were exceptionally close.

As roommates, they were terrible mutual influences, chronic slackers who debated endlessly whether to hit the gym, study, or clean their barracks room—and then did none of those things. Other cadets would marvel as they ordered and wolfed down giant, grease-soaked takeout pizzas called B-52s, topping them off with a pint each of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. Their room was a sty by West Point standards. Less than a month into their senior year, their cadet platoon leader had no choice but to write them up for it, the only room he had to cite that semester. But Todd and Tim were hilarious together: Their friends would compare them to classic comedy duos, everyone from Abbott and Costello to Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble, with Todd as the frenetic jester and Tim as his willing straight man. Even when Tim was the butt of Todd’s jokes, he never seemed to mind. The consummate team player, he was happy to have found a place where he fit in.

Todd could walk down the hallway, past one identical room after another, and point to a close friend in each. Will Tucker, from Haleyville, Alabama, population 4,182, was one of the closest. Will’s father ran a bait-and-tackle shop and his mother taught junior high; Will was the salutatorian of his high school class. He was a tough, quiet kid. In a football practice during his sophomore year of high school, he had broken his femur, but held on to the ball until the end of the play. Later, as a sixteen-year-old, Will had taken a job that involved overseeing work-release prisoners from the local jail. He’d drive the van, watch as they worked, and take them on illicit runs for cigarettes and Burger King on the way back to the lockup.

Will was as tight-lipped as Todd was gregarious. Partly it was a matter of his personality, and partly it was because he took so much crap for his thick southern accent. Todd ribbed him mercilessly, but that was different; Will barely minded. After three years together, in what Todd sarcastically referred to as their “happy Hudson home,” they were as close as friends could be. Will had a sister back home in Alabama, but Todd was like the brother he’d never had.

This, for Todd, was the essence of West Point. “Duty, honor, country”

was the academy's motto, and everyone talked constantly about honor and commitment, loyalty and patriotism. All that was true and good, but stripped of its pomp and circumstance, the place was really about love. Love of your country, love of your classmates and friends, and love of the future officers you'd someday serve with. Most of all, West Point was about learning to love the soldiers you would someday lead, the privates and sergeants, knuckleheads and heroes alike, who might, just once, in a life-justifying moment, look to you for leadership in some great battle on a distant shore.

IN 2001, THOUGH, Todd was thinking about a different kind of love. Jen Reardon was a blond-haired, blue-eyed biology major in her junior year at Boston College. They had met online through a mutual friend, a girl named Ryan Poe who had grown up across the street from Todd in Riverside and who worked with Jen at the college bookstore.

"What made you decide on West Point?" Jen typed in one early instant message.

"My sister told me I had to," Todd replied.

"Oh, good reason."

"I never cross my sister," Todd continued. "For safety reasons."

Before long, they were up until two or three A.M. most nights, chatting on the computer. Theirs was a brave new twenty-first-century relationship in which they talked daily, grew close, and shared their innermost secrets before actually meeting in person. Finally, in April 2001, Todd headed up to Boston for a weekend to meet Jen. He was eager and nervous. Their intense interaction had an element of escapist fantasy, and it was weird suddenly to encounter each other as living, breathing human beings. With some of Jen's college friends, they went to an Irish bar called Kinvara, a dive where they were pretty sure Jen's improbable fake ID would work. (She was twenty; it said she was twenty-six.) Slowly, the ice melted, as they talked, danced, and sang along with the 1980s cover band. When they finally kissed, it was as if they'd been together for months.

Todd's spring had gone by in a blur—his fast-moving romance with

Jen, raucous road trips, wild parties, and an episode involving the Boston College police department, smelling salts, and a trip to the hospital emergency room. And then the academic year was over, and Todd had left, first for a service project in Seattle and then for his assignment in Korea. He called Jen at the end of nearly every workday, and the phone would ring late at night at her mother's house in Pennsylvania where she was staying for the summer. Todd wrote long letters, once scribbling on the backs of pages from a "Far Side" calendar so Jen could read the cartoons if she was bored by what he had to say. That seemed highly unlikely, and by the end of the summer, he was pouring his heart out. "I dreamt that some day I would find a girl that could make me as happy as you do," Todd wrote. Then, on second thought, he scribbled out "dreamt," and replaced it with "prayed."

Now, in August 2001, Todd was back at West Point, and Jen drove up from Pennsylvania to greet him. It was her turn to be nervous. Todd was a great guy—funny, good-looking—and he made her feel special. But their relationship was intense. Who knew where this might lead?

"Those West Pointers," warned one of her roommates, a girl whose father had graduated from the academy, but whose parents' marriage hadn't lasted. "Their goal their firstie year is to find a wife that will follow them around the Army and cook and clean for them. You have to beware of that."

Todd wasn't allowed off campus during Jen's visit, and she couldn't even hug him, since public displays of affection were prohibited when a cadet was in uniform. It was her first visit to West Point, and she was surprised to find the place so cold and gray, even at the end of summer, nothing like the pretty campus at Boston College. All around were reminders that Todd owed a half decade of his life to the Army. True, no West Point class had graduated into conflict since Vietnam, years before either of them had been born. But still, there would be months of training, and an assignment to some distant military base—maybe Germany, or South Korea again. Todd could even be sent away for six months or more on a peacekeeping deployment in Bosnia. If only he weren't in the Army, Jen thought, things would be so much easier.

Todd led Jen down Flirty Walk, the one place on campus where he was

allowed to walk arm-in-arm with a girl while in uniform. As he talked about the academy's history and traditions, he spoke with such passion and reverence that Jen—against her better judgment—grew fascinated. The campus seemed an irony-free oasis, both severe and beautiful, apart from the rest of America. The academy made her proud of her country, proud of her boyfriend's military service, proud that he loved America and wasn't afraid to say it.

A couple of weeks later, Todd called Jen at Boston College with a plan. Her birthday was coming up, and he wanted to do something special. Pack a bag, he told her. Bring something nice to wear. He drove the two hundred miles up to Massachusetts in his Chevy Suburban and whisked her away over Labor Day weekend to the Diamond District Inn, a bed and breakfast north of Boston. It was romantic and wonderful, intoxicating for Jen. Before the weekend was out, Todd started talking about getting engaged.

"You're out of your mind!" Jen replied. Marriage? She was crazy about him, but she was just a kid, and they'd known each other for only a few months. She'd hardly seen Todd since Korea, and just a few times before that. She did her best to ignore him, pretending he hadn't said the word.

"I'm not going to pressure you. I'm not going to push you," Todd replied. But sooner or later, he promised, "You're going to realize what you already know in your heart. It's just your stubborn head that won't cooperate."