MS

Dear whoever reads this,

Please do not mistake my silence for happiness. I have become great at smiling whilst my world turns upside down. You see, I have a secret. Somewhere above the clouds, hidden from ordinary people, there is a roller coaster that belongs to only military children and their military parents they love. The track appears when someone we love puts on their uniform and leaves for a place we cannot follow, we never know how long this track will last, or how many twists, turns, ups and downs lie ahead.

Mine began on the day my dad put on his Naval uniform and left for eight months.

I remember standing beneath the airport's towering glass windows, watching my Dad prepare to embark on his deployment. Above me, hidden from ordinary eyes stood this golden roller coaster, which I was about to board. As he took his final steps towards the airport departure hall, the carriage prepared for its dreadful climb. I clutched onto the handlebars wishing a fairy godmother would appear and turn back time, even for a moment. But no magic could make him stay. My carriage reached the top of the steep climb and started quickly descending into the shadows below. Eight long months lay before me, and I had no idea what lay in this darkness ahead.

As my carriage steadied forward, I found myself travelling through a kingdom of endless waiting. At first, I hoped the worst part of the journey was over, but little did I know how many twists and turns were yet to come. Some days felt golden, with rays of sunshine breaking through the clouds. These were the best days, where little messages from my Dad appeared like enchanted letters from a distant kingdom. For a moment the darkness disappeared, reminding me of the connection that still remained despite the miles in between. Yet, without warning, grey, dark gathered above me, casting shadows across the golden tracks. These storms always arrived, when least expected. It was during these moments that I realised the cruellest parts of the journey could come at any time.

The hardest storms were the ones I never saw coming. Sometimes, they arrived on ordinary days like the ones where I went to school, or sat in front of the TV in the evening. I would watch other children from the world below, with their parents and wondered what it would feel like to have my dad beside me, rather than miles away in the middle of the ocean. My golden tracks would grow dark, and the clouds would gather until I could barely see the path ahead. I tried to remind myself how these days would end, and how every twist and turn would have to return to the normal path at some point. But belief in this was extremely difficult. When the weeks turned into months, even the brightest memories felt a lifetime away. Still I held onto the belief that my tracks I followed would lead back to my Dad at some point.

Then, one morning a tiny golden light appeared at the end of my tracks. At first I thought it was a trick of the enchanted clouds, but as soon came the words I had been longing to hear; my dad was coming home. Suddenly, my carriage began to climb, rising above the grey clouds that had haunted me for so long. For the first time in months, I allowed myself to imagine this long awaited moment, that I would finally see him again. Yet, even as excitement fulfilled me, I held nervously onto the handle bars, afraid to believe the end of the journey was finally near.
As the airport came into view, my carriage began to slow. The golden tracks beneath me shone brighter than ever before, and for the first time, I could see the end of my journey. Then, through the crowd, I spotted him. My Dad. the moment our eyes locked, every storm, every dark cloud and every lonely night seemed to fade away. I jumped out of my carriage and ran towards him, happy tears filled my eyes, as I wrapped him in my arms as tightly as I could. No words could fully describe how my emotions felt of finally having him home, after

eight long months. I had imagined this moment, even though nothing could have prepared me. The roller coaster had been tough, but the love between us had never disappeared.

So if you ever see a military child smiling, remember that their world may be turning upside down. Having experienced multiple deployments, I know each goodbye is hard, counting down the days, until celebrating the homecomings, while learning to live with the goodbyes. And although the roller coaster can't be controlled, I will keep riding, because every journey does have an ending of seeing the person I have missed most. Perhaps that is the greatest magic of all; no matter how far my dad travels, he will always be worth every twist and turn.

Your sincerely
A military child.