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Thesis Proposal

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Thesis Proposal—*Four Fires*—A Novel

Summary

After Elijah Alcott's father, an Army Ranger, falls from a helicopter in a fatal training accident in 1993, Elijah is sent to live with his paternal grandfather, Papa, in rural Washington. There he meets his cousins, Eric and John, and the girl next door, Simone. Together they navigate the pitfalls of love, friendship, loss, and things left unfinished, all under the specter of military heritage, of past wars, and of future wars that will tear them apart.

In line with Phil Klay's *Redeployment* and the work of Eliot Ackerman, *Four Fires* is a novel about our obsession with war, following the experiences of one American family as its youngest members ready themselves for Afghanistan and Iraq. The novel examines the full extent of war's impact on its participants and observers, both before and after battle, tracing the influence of war stories as they pass from one generation to the next.

Synopsis

Memorial Day Weekend, 1993. ELIJAH goes camping at the start of the Appalachian Trail with his father, DOUG, an Army Ranger, who is more often gone than home and has just

returned from Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. The trip is marred by tension. Elijah tries to learn something about his father. He can't seem to avoid thoughts about his father's recent wartime experience, asking, "Did you ever kill anyone?" Doug answers the question, but not in great enough detail to satisfy Elijah. The trip ends with a promise: to hike the entire Appalachian Trail after Doug retires.

Shortly after the trip, Elijah's father falls from a Blackhawk at Fort Benning and dies. Two years later, Elijah's mother, an Army staff sergeant, is implicated in a cover-up and must accept unaccompanied orders to Korea to save her own Army career. Elijah moves to rural Washington (an hour outside Fort Lewis) to live with his paternal grandparents. He leaves behind his girlfriend, ASHLEY—the troubled daughter of a sergeant major.

In Washington, he meets his grandfather and namesake, PAPA. Papa is a gruff but well-read former Marine sergeant who fought at the Chosin Reservoir in the Korean War. Papa talks little about war, and even lies to downplay his participation. He teaches Elijah about the wilderness, shooting, fist fights, and what it means to sacrifice for love rather than for country.

Elijah's cousins ERIC (two years older) and JOHN (same age as Elijah) also spend the summer at Papa's. Eric and John come from the only money in the Alcott family. Both parents work in Seattle's financial sector. John wants nothing more than to follow in his parents' footsteps and to grow the family's money. Eric, however, wants to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point—and he reveals these plans to Elijah.

The legacy of Papa's time in Korea, and the Navy Cross he allegedly earned there, proves too strong for the three boys to resist. Eric and Elijah look at war as a right of passage endured by Alcotts, dating back to Belleau Wood. John sees it as something to gawk at. Elijah discovers Papa's Marine Corps trunk locked in the attic, along with some mysterious photos of a young

girl who is shown with his father and uncle. The boys are determined to make sense of Papa's past. They spend many nights speculating about Papa's war. They form the opinions about the military that will drive John to a lucrative banking career and Eric and Elijah into the perils of their own wars.

SIMONE moves into the cabin next door to Papa's at the end of Elijah's first summer in Washington, near the end of his cousins' stay. She's tough and stubborn and sometimes recklessly enthusiastic about attending West Point like her dad, an officer in the 75th Ranger Regiment. She leads Elijah down her path, inspires him, and awakens him sexually. They spend the school year together, running on the cross-country team, camping, and training for West Point—a goal Simone convinces Elijah to pursue, not realizing they'd be competing against each other for their district's Congressional nomination.

After Eric's acceptance to West Point, Papa, despite his apprehension about Eric's choice, plans a celebratory hiking trip to the Wonderland Trail. The trip is set for the following summer, which is the last all three boys will spend at Papa's. Elijah and Simone help Papa prepare for the trip, the three of them training together. When the cousins show, only John has his backpacking gear. Eric must attend Beast Barracks, the seven-week boot camp for new cadets, and must return home early.

The others decide to go without Eric. But before they leave, Papa receives notice from his doctor at the VA that he has lung cancer, a diagnosis suspected, given his chain-smoking and worsening cough. They head for Mount Rainier National Park, the clock working against them. Floods have washed out sections of the Wonderland Trail. The trip ends after one soggy night.

Papa refuses cancer treatment. Elijah begins to prod harder for information about Korea and the photos of the girl in the attic. Papa remains evasive about his true role in the war. A week

before his death, however, Papa tells Elijah the girl was his illegitimate daughter, the full story illustrating the psychological toll of the Korean War.

Only Simone gets accepted to the academy. She and Elijah spend a week together at a rustic lodge in Washington, a high school graduation gift from Papa and her father. At the lodge, Simone ends her relationship with Elijah, who returns home to find Papa dead.

After college, Elijah enters the post-9/11 Army as a lieutenant. Elijah is assigned to the Air Defense Artillery branch—a job that leads him to Osan Air Base, Korea. He drills and trains to fight a war with North Korea while the War on Terror rages. His battalion is rife with ethical problems: alcohol abuse, solicitation of prostitutes, and fraternization.

Elijah's platoon sergeant is an empty uniform. He has a back injury that seems to prevent him from being a functional soldier. He soon finds a way to reach retirement on limited duty stateside, leaving Elijah without a platoon sergeant. Elijah leans on STAFF SERGEANT CEDRIC TIBBS, his next senior non-commissioned officer, to help run the platoon. With Tibbs' help, Elijah's career takes off. He becomes the star platoon leader in the battalion, the favorite of LIEUTENANT COLONEL CORY, irritating the senior platoon leader, FIRST LIEUTENANT KRISTINA VOLKOV.

On New Year's Eve 2002, Elijah attends a party for the battalion officers hosted at the home of Cory. There he stumbles into hints of an inappropriate relationship between Volkov and their Battery Commander, CAPTAIN MIKE DAVIS. A few days later, Volkov confirms Elijah's suspicions, telling him to forget what he saw.

Cory plans to promote Elijah to Battery Executive Officer, send him to Ranger School, and pull strings to get him to Iraq. Volkov had her hopes set on the executive officer slot and it becomes obvious that she was sleeping with Davis to get there. But Davis cuts her off and

Volkov is left without any friends. She approaches Elijah for support, seemingly trying to dispel their shared animosity. Elijah and Volkov begin an alcohol-fueled romantic relationship that erodes the drive he once had to attend Ranger School.

Meanwhile, Eric, who deployed to Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division in 2001-2002, is in Washington on leave. He's en route to the Ranger Orientation Program, which serves as the gatekeeper to the 75th Ranger Regiment—the Army's elite light infantry unit. Elijah takes leave at the same time and meets Eric at Papa's cabin. Elijah presses Eric to share his experience in Afghanistan. Eric is reluctant, but after a night of drinking by the fire, he starts a series of war stories he can't stop, leaving Elijah more confused than enlightened. The two then go to see John, who is working for a large financial firm headquartered in Seattle. John throws a party for his brother and cousin, but Eric leaves, feeling too disconnected from civilian life to enjoy himself.

Once back in Korea, Elijah's career founders. He ignores a warning from Tibbs, who is transferring, that Volkov is using him. Paperwork and the burden of running the platoon alone bury him. He also begins to suspect Volkov is still involved with Captain Davis. Elijah's confusion multiplies when his replacement platoon sergeant finally arrives, and he learns it is Ashley, his girlfriend from Fort Benning.

Eric is shot through the neck, patrolling near Khost, Afghanistan, and dies. After the funeral, Eric's company commander, who served as a sergeant under Elijah's dad years ago, tells the family the details of Eric's death. He gives Elijah a letter from his dad, revealing his death was a suicide not a training accident.

Elijah returns to the chaos of his relationship and career, no longer searching for the glory of military service. He, Volkov, and Jordan become embroiled in a battalion-wide investigation

of their relationships. In the end, Lieutenant Colonel Cory relieves Captain Davis of command. He reprimands Volkov, who checked herself into psychiatric care following a failed pregnancy fraud and suicide attempt. And he cancels Elijah's orders to Ranger School, a move that ultimately shortens Elijah's route to war.

Elijah deploys to Balad Air Base, Iraq, as a battalion admin officer, a paper pusher. He spends a week at war, disenchanted by his job. That week is filled with PowerPoints and reports. Elijah needs to decompress after nearly fist-fighting another officer. He goes for a run, feels alive in the desert night, and is struck by an incoming mortar round. After a year and a half at Walter Reed, and nearly losing his right leg, the Army presents Elijah with the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star—a gesture that sickens him.

Elijah stays with John in his extravagant Seattle home. He struggles to find his place in the city, among John's fast-money friends. He leaves unannounced, still on crutches, buys an old truck, and drives to Papa's cabin. Elijah begins to clean out the old place (His grandmother died of a stroke while he was in Walter Reed.). He meets Simone's father outside one day and learns Simone has also been wounded in Iraq and will be coming home.

A few months into the task of gutting the cabin, Elijah drags Papa's trunk from the attic. He is determined to pop the lock. He limps out to the tool shed for a hammer. Simone is in the cabin when he returns. They open Papa's trunk, finding his Navy Cross medal and citation, describing his valor at the Chosin Reservoir. They also find a pendant—a human ear. They learn war stories are never quite how we imagine. They burn the citation and the pendant in a trash can fire, leaving their future open-ended.

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