On patrol, _______ _______ and _______ _______ fight over _______ 's missing jackknife, which he presumed _______ stole. _______ easily overpowers _______ , hitting him repeatedly and breaking his _______. Because of this, _______ starts to worry, growing anxious of what revenge _______ might take on him. He keeps track of _______ , paying attention to his whereabouts and being cautious of him when _______ handles weapons. This tension builds up in _______ , and he is continually nervous, until he eventually snaps and begins firing his weapon into the air, yelling _______ 's name. Later that night, _______ borrows a pistol and uses it to break his own _______. He shows _______ what he has done and asks whether they were now even; _______ says sure. The next morning, _______ can't stop laughing; he had stolen the _______. Over the next month, _______ and _______ begin to pair up on ambushes together and cover each other on patrol. They slowly build up their _______ and _______. They draw up a pact that says if either one of them is badly _______ , that the other would _______ him. They both sign the agreement. A few months later, _______ is severely injured when he steps on a rigged _______ round. The blast of the explosion severs his right leg at the knee. A medic treats _______ and prepares him for evacuation. _______ goes to _______ before he is evacuated out, and as _______ opens his eyes and sees Jensen, he pleads with him not to _______ him. Jensen tries to say some encouraging words, and swears not to follow their agreement and kill _______. _______ is evacuated by helicopter, but the unit learns later that he had _______ in transit. O'Brien thinks this news brought _______ to Jensen, who felt a heavy burden.

Analysis

O'Brien presents the story of a fight within a war, making us focus initially on the difference between a war and a fight. The fight is in some ways a microcosm to the macrocosm of Vietnam; both are violent engagements, both pit enemies against one another, and both have rules that are often ignored by the participants. O'Brien shows some of the similarities between the two, such as the seeming randomness of the quarrel between Strunk and Jensen in the "Enemies" vignette, and Strunk stepping on a mortar bomb in the sister vignette, "Friends." O'Brien says that the fight was over "something stupid — a missing jackknife," but however meaningless the reason, the fight was nonetheless a vicious engagement between two foes.
In addition to the randomness of Vietnam, O'Brien highlights the meaninglessness of it by beginning the description of the fight with the jackknife and by using the vignette as a metaphor for this meaninglessness that the characters feel. Strunk laughs uncontrollably when Jensen breaks his own nose out of fear for what Strunk might do in retaliation, and admits that he in fact did steal the knife. He laughs because Jensen breaking his nose has no meaning — Jensen was justified in his attacking Strunk in the first place. The uselessness of his gesture, motivated by fear, causes us to view the entire fight as void of meaning. We can then apply this model to Vietnam, seeing how the larger battle, no matter who wins or loses, will be meaningless.

On the other hand, O'Brien shows how the microcosm/macrocosm model fails by making the fight and the war different. First, the fight is more personal and emotional, for example, than Strunk stepping on a mortar bomb. Strunk gets his nose broken because of a fight, because his enemy relentlessly beat him and crushed his bones; he loses his leg for no reason other than where he stepped. He could not have known or prevented it, and anyone in the company could have the same happen at any moment. The fight is personal, between two opponents; the war is not. What the war lacks is a visible opponent, a physical enemy. When Strunk and Jensen fight, the quarrel becomes emotional and out-of-control because they have both yearned for a real enemy to touch, see, and destroy. In other words, Strunk and Jensen find in their opponent the physical presence that that war has denied them.

Because of the realness of a physical opponent, everything is more intense. Jensen's inability to relax is an example of how the fight is more pressing, more real to him than the war. After all, should a soldier be more afraid of one of his own company, even someone with whom he has had an argument, than an entire country of men who would shoot him on sight? Probably not, but the proximity and physicality of his new "enemy" fills Jensen with greater fear than all the Viet Cong. Likewise, the pact that Jensen and Strunk form is an extension of this personal side of war. O'Brien tells us that they did not become friends per se, but they learned to trust one another enough to form a death pact. Yet even though this was a sign of trust between two men, they still insisted on drawing it up on paper, signing it, and getting witnesses. They trusted each other enough to end their lives but not enough to go without public ratification of their pact.

In the end, when Strunk loses his leg, his fear of Jensen killing him is absolute. He does not appeal to any in his company who knew of the pact, just Jensen, whom he insists swear not to kill him. Ironically, the oath is enough to appease Strunk, where earlier an oath would not suffice; the desperateness of his situation forces him to take Jensen's promise on faith alone. Trust, then, depends on the situation, not on the person. Strunk trusts Jensen not to kill him on his word, but he would not trust him to make the original pact without a compact. O'Brien makes us wonder whom you can trust in a war.

The "Friends" vignette wraps up with Jensen violating his original pledge and not killing Strunk. Yet when news of Strunk's death comes to him, it "seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight." Jensen had gone back on his word and failed his friend, thus making himself no good friend to Strunk. Perhaps because he had not been severely wounded, Jensen had not undergone the same transformation that Strunk had, wishing for a life after a massive and debilitating wound more than the death of a soldier. Either way, Strunk's death fulfills Jensen's promise not to let either of them live after sustaining such a wound. He is able again to be Strunk's friend not through his actions, but through fate and his inaction. O'Brien forces us to question what is right and wrong in a war. If Jensen had lived up to his pledge, he would be a murderer. By failing to do it, even at Strunk's behest, he proves himself no friend. O'Brien makes us wonder which is worse
“Enemies” and “Friends” Summary

On patrol, Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen fight over Jensen's missing jackknife, which he presumed Strunk stole. Jensen easily overpowers Strunk, hitting him repeatedly and breaking his nose. Because of this, Jensen starts to worry, growing anxious of what revenge Strunk might take on him. He keeps track of Strunk, paying attention to his whereabouts and being cautious of him when Strunk handles weapons. This tension builds up in Jensen, and he is continually nervous, until he eventually snaps and begins firing his weapon into the air, yelling Strunk's name. Later that night, Jensen borrows a pistol and uses it to break his own nose. He shows Strunk what he has done and asks whether they were now even; Strunk says sure. The next morning, Strunk can't stop laughing; he had stolen the jackknife.

Over the next month, Jensen and Strunk begin to pair up on ambushes together and cover each other on patrol. They slowly build up their friendship and trust. They draw up a pact that says if either one of them is badly wounded, that the other would kill him. They both sign the agreement. A few months later, Strunk is severely injured when he steps on a rigged mortar round. The blast of the explosion severs his right leg at the knee. A medic treats Strunk and prepares him for evacuation. Jensen goes to Strunk before he is evacuated out, and as Strunk opens his eyes and sees Jensen, he pleads with him not to kill him. Jensen tries to say some encouraging words, and swears not to follow their agreement and kill Strunk. Strunk is evacuated by helicopter, but the unit learns later that he had died in transit. O'Brien thinks this news brought relief to Jensen, who felt a heavy burden.
The Things They Carried

“How to Tell a True War Story” Summary

O'Brien offers a story about _______ _______ that he assures his readers is true: Rat's friend, _______ _______ , is killed, and _______ writes _______ 's sister a letter. Rat's letter talks about her brother and the crazy stunts he attempted. Rat believes the letter is poignant and personal; however, from Lemon's sister's viewpoint, it is inappropriate and disturbing. The sister never writes back, and Rat is offended and angered, as the reader is left to infer as the sister never returns the letter.

O'Brien suggests that _______ 's sister's failure to return the letter offers a kind of sad and true moral to the story. _______ 's death, an accident resulting from a game of catch with a _______ , is described in detail. O'Brien remembers _______ _______ strewn in the jungle trees and thinks about his own memories of the event. He comments that in true stories it is difficult to distinguish what actually happened from what seemed to happen, again blurring the line between truth and story.

O'Brien offers readers the advice that they should be skeptical, and offers a story told to him by _______ _______ as an example. A patrol goes into the mountains for a weeklong operation to monitor enemy _______. The _______ is spooky, and the men start hearing strange, eerie noises which become an opera, a _______ club, chanting, and so on, but the voices they hear are not _______. _______ says that the mountains, trees, and rocks were making the noise, and that the men called in massive _______. He says a colonel later asked them why, and they do not answer because they know he will not understand their story. _______ says that the moral is that nobody listens; the next day _______ admits he made up parts of the story.

Next, O'Brien tells what following Lemon's death: the unit comes across a baby _______ _______. _______ _______ tries to feed it but it does not eat, so _______ steps back and _______ the animal in its knee. Though crying, he continues to shoot the buffalo, aiming to _______ rather than _______ it. Others dump the near dead buffalo in a well to kill it. O'Brien concludes that a true war story, like the one about the water buffalo, is never about _______; these stories are about _______ , _______ , and _______ .

Analysis

O'Brien offers abstract commentary on storytelling and blurs the divisions between truth and fiction and author and authorial persona through a series of paradoxical reversals. The primary examples are the paragraphs that begin and end the chapter. O'Brien immediately brands the story as true. In a direct address to readers he claims, "this is true." In the final paragraphs, O'Brien reverses this claim by redefining truth. "None of it happened," he writes, "none of it." Central to understanding the chapter is charting O'Brien's progression of calling the story absolutely true to calling the veracity of the story and the reliability of the "O'Brien" persona narrator into question. O'Brien does not lie — he changes the definition of telling the truth.

(OVER)
O'Brien offers a story about Rat Kiley that he assures his readers is true: Rat's friend, Curt Lemon, is killed, and Rat writes Lemon's sister a letter. Rat's letter talks about her brother and the crazy stunts he attempted. Rat believes the letter is poignant and personal; however, from Lemon's sister's viewpoint, it is inappropriate and disturbing. The sister never writes back, and Rat is offended and angered, as the reader is left to infer as the sister never returns the letter.

O'Brien suggests that Lemon's sister's failure to return the letter offers a kind of sad and true moral to the story. Lemon's death, an accident resulting from a game of catch with a grenade, is described in detail. O'Brien remembers body parts strewn in the jungle trees and thinks about his own memories of the event. He comments that in true stories it is difficult to distinguish what actually happened from what seemed to happen, again blurring the line between truth and story.

O'Brien offers readers the advice that they should be skeptical, and offers a story told to him by Mitchell Sanders as an example. A patrol goes into the mountains for a weeklong operation to monitor enemy movement. The jungle is spooky, and the men start hearing strange, eerie noises which become an opera, a glee club, chanting, and so on, but the voices they hear are not human. Sanders says that the mountains, trees, and rocks were making the noise, and that the men called in massive firepower. He says a colonel later asked them why, and they do not answer because they know he will not understand their story. Sanders says that the moral is that nobody listens; the next day Sanders admits he made up parts of the story.

Next, O'Brien tells what following Lemon's death: the unit comes across a baby water buffalo. Rat Kiley tries to feed it but it does not eat, so Kiley steps back and shoots the animal in its knee. Though crying, he continues to shoot the buffalo, aiming to hurt rather than kill it. Others dump the near dead buffalo in a well to kill it. O'Brien concludes that a true war story, like the one about the water buffalo, is never about war; these stories are about love, memory, and sorrow.
In this vignette, O'Brien presents two stories that fail to be "true" to their intended audiences. The first example is the "few stories" Rat Kiley includes in his letter to Curt Lemon's sister. To Rat, these stories about Lemon's extreme and questionable acts are true, and he wants to convey this truth to the sister, who fails to respond because she understands the stories in completely antithetical ways.

Rat Kiley and Lemon's sister belong to different interpretive communities; they have different sets of experiences and expectations that they use to understand stories. The result is a radical difference in how they understand and feel the same "actual" events of a story. O'Brien carries this idea of competing communities of interpretation over to the text, which he demonstrates through his appraisal of the response of the woman who tells him he likes the story of the buffalo. She doesn't get the real truth of the story, which is Rat's fraternal love for Lemon, because she belongs to a different interpretive community.

O'Brien is commenting on readers and hearers of stories. Readers must remember that they are reading a story, by a fictional author, about listening to stories and can, unlike Lemon's sister, feel a personal response to the story's outcome. The story takes on a message of truth because of the context of the unanswered letter. On the one hand, Lemon's sister does respond, but on the other hand, her response is in the act of not answering Rat's letter. It is this action that makes the reader align his or her sympathies with Rat, and that solicitation of feeling from the reader is what makes the story "true." The story, O'Brien writes, "[is] so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back."

The second story that fails to connect its meaning with its hearer is the fantastic and spooky story that Mitchell Sanders tells about the squad who was assigned to listen for signs of enemy movement. Just as O'Brien does in the chapter's first sentence, Sanders emphasizes that the story is true because it actually happened. Even though Sanders admits that he embellished the story — and that it technically is not "true" because it did not actually happen — this is irrelevant to O'Brien. Given the criteria on which he bases the "truth" of stories, Sanders's story has a kernel of truth in it: It is nearly true. O'Brien writes, "I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth."

In this sense, O'Brien's analysis of Sanders's story recalls the title of the chapter, "How to Tell a True War Story." It suggests a second meaning to be applied to the readers and hearers of stories: that readers and hearers can "tell," or discern, stories that hold a truth, regardless of whether the events of the story actually occurred, based on certain criteria. According to O'Brien, the truth of a story depends solely on the audience hearing it told.

The common denominator for O'Brien is finally "gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." O'Brien demonstrates this idea by employing repetition. A noteworthy example is the four varying accounts of Curt Lemon's death within the chapter. Each retelling is embellished until finally a "true" version emerges that viscerally affects "O'Brien," and by extension, the reader. The details of O'Brien's nightmare flashback — Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" — cinch the story as true. O'Brien assents that "truth" is gauged by the responses stories evoke: "... if I could ever get the story right. ... then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must've been the final truth." O'Brien revives the trope of meta-narrative commentary as the story has been recreated in this fictional writer's memoir, which is in fact not true, but true enough to move the reader to identify emotionally with O'Brien and to share in his experiences through the use of imagination and sympathy.