On Reading War and Peace

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Poor Napoleon. I imagine him sitting under a tent on a field in Belgium, lugubriously stroking his sun-burned widow’s peak, picking, perhaps, at a pair of Corsican sausages from a lunch his mother sent, quietly prognosticating fifty thousand deaths. No one has ever been so alone. Included, of course, in this lunch were three truffles a la cendre and a note that said, “I love you. Please come right home after the war.”

In the camp, horses’ hind quarters shone like a woman’s clean hair. At night, the moonlight leaks onto tables full of maps, papers full of plans, and white hands scrubbing cannons.

Considering his red-cheeked Josephine, that scratchy cot in Belgium is not where I’d have been. War must be unfathomable in itchy socks!

That one summer day when I marched drowsily up and down the lawn, waiting for the onion slices to come off the barbeque, tossing
Sean a can of cold cream soda, I imagined that these imaginings would somehow keep the wide net of human activity miraculously untangled and nick-free. But it was Saturday, so we just sat there. In our lawn chairs. Belching out the taste of burnt meat. We waited for the sun to go down and the moon to come up, and when the crickets came out, we went in.

Sean says life is a rabble of butterflies blindly slapping each other on their way to Mexico year after miraculous-accidental year. Which is exactly what Napoleon thinks it is not, pouring over his maps, making his plans, abandoning Moscow. And I have to laugh because of course Sean wins. Of course this isn’t our last barbeque and of course it is.