



Do You Hear Me?

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VOICE

 VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

This short work of fiction explores the enduring anguish and spiritual suffering of military families who have lost a loved one.

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KEYWORDS:

fiction; military family; grief

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Blome, D. (2023). Do You Hear Me? *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 9(2), pp. 37–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v9i2.368>

Nicole was upstairs, kneeling on the bedroom floor. Her forearms rested on the bed. Her hands were overlapped. She was staring at the brass knobs on her dresser. There were ten of them, each about the diameter of a quarter. *They're all tarnished and old*, she thought. *And just like me, they're always coming loose.*

With a sigh she crossed her fingers and closed her eyes. "Father in heaven," she said in a low voice, "give me strength today." Nicole cleared her throat. "Strength to endure." She opened her eyes and stared at the brass knobs.

Then she heard the screen door slam from downstairs. Still on her knees she turned toward the bedroom door.

"Erin? Is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom."

Nicole stood up, left the bedroom, and sat down at the top of the stairs. From there she watched her twelve-year-old daughter take off her shoes and close the front door.

"Hey, where were you?" Nicole said, smiling.

Erin looked up at her mother. "Were you sleeping?" she said.

The smile left Nicole's face. "No."

"You look tired."

"Where were you?"

"With Joey."

Nicole dropped her head into her hands. "Oh my God," she said, massaging her temples. "Erin, this has got to stop."

Erin glared at her mother. "What does?"

"I have to know where you are."

"You knew where I was."

"Look," Nicole said, lifting her head, "I don't want you walking down that busy road by yourself."

Erin stepped into the living room and sat on the couch. "Well," she said, "you won't go with me."

"I can't go with you," Nicole said as she walked down the stairs into the living room.

"You mean, you won't go with me."

"No, I can't. There's a difference."

"Then drive me there."

"Drive you there? I don't even want you there."

"Sorry, I made a promise."

"Erin, look at me."

Erin shook her head.

Nicole sighed. "Were you drawing something for Joey?" she said.

Erin nodded.

"What did you draw him this time?"

"I didn't finish. It was getting late."

"What was it?"

"A frog."

"A frog? Why a frog?"

"Because that's what Joey was in the Navy."

Nicole smiled. "A frogman, yes."

"But I was drawing the animal."

"Can I see it?"

"No."

Nicole scratched the back of her neck. "Erin, can you make me a promise?"

"Depends."

"Can you please tell me if you're going to leave the house?"

"Sure," she said.

"And tell me where you're going?"

"I'll tell you but you already know. I won't leave Joey by himself."

"Honey, Joey's dead."

"Not to me he isn't."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Then what did you mean?"

Nicole took a step back. "I mean his memory is alive, and always will be, but your brother is dead. You'll never see him again, and you'll never talk to him again. Do you still not understand?"

"No, I don't. And I still talk to Joey."

"I know, honey, but he doesn't talk back."

"Yes, he does."

Nicole's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"He talks to me."

"Erin, for Christ's sake."

"What?"

"Tell me what you mean." Nicole sat on the floor and hugged her knees. She looked up at her daughter.

Erin tilted her head and said, "I mean, we talk."

"About what?"

"About why you don't go to church anymore. And why you don't visit Joey. And why you're mad at God." Erin stared at her mother for a moment then stood up and left the room.

Nicole listened to her daughter walk upstairs. Then she closed her eyes and in a low voice said, "Father, please. I need strength. You know my heart."

Erin ran back downstairs and opened the front door. She looked at her mother, shook her head, and left.

Nicole stood up and ran after her but tripped on the front porch and fell. By the time she reached her feet she could no longer see Erin. She put her hands to her mouth and called for her. A car sped past. Nicole stood there for a minute. Then she wiped her eyes and walked back into the house.

Using the handrail, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom and flopped down on the bed. She lay motionless for a few minutes before turning her head toward the brass knobs on the dresser.

Those ugly things are older than I am, she thought. *And they'll be ugly when I'm dead. For years I prayed in front of them, every day. For hours. In the morning, at night. How many hours just for Joey? For what? I was on my knees*

when they knocked on the front door. Do you hear me? On my goddamn knees.

Nicole closed her eyes and felt her head sink into the mattress. The room was dark when she woke up to the phone ringing. She thought of Erin.

"No," she said, jumping to her feet. Nicole stumbled down the stairs and ran across the living room into the kitchen, snatching the phone off its base.

"Hello?" she said, out of breath.

"Nicole?"

"Yes?"

"It's Pastor Jeff calling from the church. How are you?"

"Pastor Jeff?" Nicole looked around the kitchen. "What time is it?"

"It's almost ten. Is everything okay?"

"I don't know. What's going on?"

Pastor Jeff cleared his throat and said, "I was working late and figured I'd call. Erin's in the cemetery again."

Nicole closed her eyes.

"I can drive her home if you'd like," Pastor Jeff said.

"No," Nicole said, "I'll come get her."

"Nicole, are you sure everything's okay?"

"I'm not sure."

"I haven't seen you in a while."

"I know, Pastor Jeff."

"What about Erin?"

"What about her?"

"Is she okay?"

"Well, apparently she's been talking to my dead son."

"She mentioned that."

Nicole groaned.

"I'll keep an eye on her until you get here," Pastor Jeff said.

"Thank you," Nicole said and hung up. She took a deep breath, walked to the front door, and stepped into the darkness.

Nicole kept her eyes on the asphalt as she walked toward the church. After ten minutes she saw the stone wall surrounding the churchyard. A set of pillars and a metal gate marked the entrance to the cemetery. Nicole walked to the gate and shook it.

"Of course. It's locked." She stood on her toes and looked for Erin in the cemetery. Then she called for her daughter. "Erin! Come here, honey, it's okay."

Thirty seconds passed. Nicole looked at her feet then climbed over the gate.

Inside the cemetery she walked on the gravel path that led to the back of the church. With each step, memories from Joey's funeral flashed through her mind.

Pastor Jeff crying during the sermon. Erin, beautiful in her black dress. Joey in the casket. The sunken cheeks and

beard. Her silent plea: *Please, son. Please sit up and tell me this is a joke.*

Nicole stopped walking. She stepped off the path, leaned over, and puked. After spitting a few times, she looked up and gasped. Erin was standing behind a headstone about twenty feet away.

"Mom?" she said.

"Jesus, honey, you scared me."

"What are you doing here?" "I came to get you," Nicole said, wiping her mouth. "And see Joey."

Erin placed her hands on the headstone. "I told Pastor Jeff not to call you."

"It's okay," Nicole said, walking toward her daughter. "I'm not mad at you."

Erin backed away. "Do you even know where Joey is?" she said.

"Erin, please." But Erin had vanished among the headstones. Nicole sighed and looked back at the gate.

Okay, she thought, *we were about halfway between the gate and the church, only a short distance off the path.* She walked toward the church, looking back every couple of steps. After a minute she stepped off the path, straining to read the headstones. She took a few more steps and froze. At her feet was a folder stuffed with drawings leaning against a headstone. The grass around the grave had been trampled. Nicole leaned forward and read the inscription.

"Joey," she whispered. Her chest was heaving as she ran her fingers over the polished stone. Bronze Star. Purple Heart. Afghanistan. March 15, 1979. June 25, 2007. "God, it's been a year," she said.

Nicole sat down next to the headstone. She hugged her knees to her chest and started crying. She remembered the hours she had spent holding Joey's hand at Bethesda. Joey, unable to talk, would wait for her to nod off. Then he'd grip her hand. "Hey," Nicole would say, and Joey would smile. She remembered the high-pitched alarms and the panic in her son's eyes as the hospital staff rushed him to the operating room. That was the last time she saw Joey alive.

"I'd give my soul to trade places," Nicole said, still hugging her knees. "Do you hear me? I'd give my soul." She wiped her eyes and looked up. Hundreds of stars met her gaze. Nicole took a deep breath. She was watching them shimmer when a meteor streaked across the sky.

"Ha," she said, remembering a conversation from long ago. Joey was nine. She had taken him camping for the first time. They were sitting outside the tent looking at the night sky. Nicole was showing Joey the Milky Way, a few constellations, and the North Star. She answered all of his

questions and even tried to explain the nature of light. “If you can believe it,” she remembered saying, “we’re actually looking into the past right now.”

“I believe it,” Joey said to her.

Nicole turned toward the headstone. She closed her eyes.

“Joey,” she said out loud, “I’m sorry.” She waited about ten seconds. “Do you hear me? Tell me you hear me.”

“I hear you, Mom.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For not being there for you.”

“You were always there for me. I was the one who left.”

“But I’ve left you here too long. I’m sorry I didn’t visit you.”

“Don’t worry about it, you needed time. Besides, Erin’s been keeping me company.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“You did nothing wrong.”

“I’ll come more often, I promise. Can we talk tonight?”

“Of course.”

“Because there’s so much I want to say.”

“I know, Mom. And there’s a lot I have to tell you.”

ARTIST STATEMENT

I am a combat veteran of the US Marine Corps who earned a PhD from Cornell University and taught at Stanford University before leaving academia for a career in urban education. A father of three, I currently live and work in Philadelphia. In 2020 I published a book on the ancient Greeks then turned to fiction. So far my work has appeared in *As You Were*, *Line of Advance*, *Proud to Be*, *The Penman Review*, *The Line Literary Review*, and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. With this latest story, I explore the enduring anguish and spiritual suffering of military families who have lost a loved one.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted: 25 June 2022 **Accepted:** 21 August 2022 **Published:** 14 March 2023

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