

P E R S



THE EXACT AND PRECISE MOMENT I decided to go to the Wall seems lost in the welling up of old emotions, in the remembrance of things past. Perhaps I made it while I watched a Veterans Day memorial service on the nightly news. Or maybe while I was being inundated during the last campaign with what our young political leaders did—or did not—do during the “Vietnam Era.” ★ Or I could have decided just the other night because of one of those normal but chilling kinds of questions my five-year-old son throws me as I tuck him in. He looks away from the framed photograph on his dresser, the picture of the smiling soldier who’s leaning too casually on the dented fender of a jeep, and he asks me, “Daddy, how tall was Grandpa?” ★ I look over at the photo for only a moment, then answer, “Very tall.” ★ Which is the way I always see him—towering over the men he led. And it was my mother who created that picture of him, just as she fashioned most of what I remember about him and that time. Over the years, though, the images have softened, turned from Kodacolor to sepia, and even her voice in my head is somewhat muted. But then sometimes,

FICTION BY JOSEPH PICI

usually while I'm lying in bed, my wife warm in sleep beside me, my eyes and my ears and my memory come wide awake. And I can hear it all again.

"Listen," my mother would say.

That's the way she'd always begin. Coming into my nine-year-old world, in slippers that hiss across the wooden floor of my bedroom, she smooths my sheets and switches off all but the little nightlight. Then, sitting on the side of the bed so that I always tip a little toward her, and with a slice of light from the hallway creeping around the door, she leans down so close I can feel her warm breath on my cheek.

In a low, velvety voice, she begins to read to me from the latest letter my father has written. Letters are always on the blue stationery we'd given him for his birthday. And once in a while, when she pauses and stares out the window into the real darkness, she lets the letter droop—as if it's a heavy weight in her hands. That's when I get a glimpse of his handwriting: always in black ink, the lines straighter than even a ruler could make, the letters of each word so perfectly formed they look like a machine has written them. He took great pride in his penmanship, which he'd learned from the nuns when he was a young boy.

I remembered once how he told me a person's writing was a picture of them, a picture painted with words. And his were so beautiful to see. But then suddenly my mother comes back from somewhere far away, straightens up the pages again, and whispers some more of the letter to me.

She says, "Listen to this. Daddy said to tell you that when he goes far into the mountains everything is so deep green it reminds him of the woods right behind our house here. Do you believe that? He thinks especially of the banks alongside the creek where the grass grows long and is soft from the water. He says he likes to think about the two of you walking barefoot on the cool rocks in that water and looking for tadpoles and crawdads."

I'm listening, but even though I miss him, I'm thinking mostly about myself. "I wish he'd come home so he could take me fishing again," I say,

squeezing my eyes shut, trying to see in my mind the two of us squatting on the edge of some pond, its water smooth as black marble, and waiting for my red bobber to disappear under the surface with a quick blink.

"He says here," she continues, "that he sees lots of boys your age in the villages he passes through and he always thinks of you when one of them smiles or waves at him. It bothers him, though, that they're as skinny and fragile as birdlegs, and he wonders how they stay alive." With her hand she pushes a few strands of my hair off my forehead, and with my eyes closed it feels like a feather brushing across me. "But you know what?" she adds. "He found out that there's a young kid named Randy in his platoon whose wife just had a baby, and guess what? They gave it your name."

Sleep, which has been hanging around at the bottom of the bed, now begins to creep over me. "I'm tired of waiting. Isn't it near time for him to be home?" I ask through a yawn.

"Really near," my mother says as she kisses me lightly on the ear.

So most of the time her whisperings are from his letters like that, but sometimes when there's a dry spell and for some crazy reason we go a week or so without hearing from him, she imagines into my ear what he'd be saying and doing and thinking—like sitting around in a tent, listening to a radio playing the Beatles' "Hey, Jude," which is their favorite song, or getting up a game of volleyball with the other guys in his platoon. I remember during our family picnics he was always the one to organize a volleyball game, putting up the net and marking out boundaries and making sure even the youngest kids got picked to play. He'd say it's only a game and it's for everyone.

Then one night when I'm so tired I have to fight to keep my eyes open, her voice is even quieter than a whisper, almost like a whisper inside a whisper, and I have to raise myself on my elbows to get my ear closer to her lips to hear. I know if I don't do this, sleep will find my eyes, and I'll have a hard time telling whether I am hearing her voice or someone else's talking in my dreams.

Holding the blue stationery tightly between her fingers, she begins as she

always does. "Listen now to what Daddy says. 'We're moving even deeper into the jungle. When we've gone this far in, and morning comes up, it's hard to tell night has ended. The trees block out the sun, the entire sky, all our light. It's real easy to lose your way—can't even tell right from left. Everything gets turned upside down. It's also hard for the mail to get in and out, so that's why you don't hear from me regularly. But there's nothing to be concerned about. In fact, the deeper in we go, the more it means we're winning. And no matter what you see or hear on the news, you shouldn't worry. Because pretty soon it will end and when I'm home we'll all go on a nice long vacation. Maybe Myrtle Beach again, where we went when I had my furlough before shipping out. Do you remember how much fun we had?'"

I nod my head yes, but I really don't remember that vacation being so much fun. What I do remember is a bad sunburn and how I had to wear a sweatshirt and when it got soaked it felt like a heavy, wet, winter overcoat on my back. And most of that vacation I was alone, standing on the water's edge, toes curled in the wet sand, looking back up the beach where the two of them sat holding hands and talking in each other's ear.

After she finishes the letter and I fall off to sleep, I dream about a wave that drags me out far beyond where I can stand and I know for sure I am drowning. And as I flail my arms, struggling for air, I see my father walking calmly down the beach and across the top of the water. When he is directly above me, he simply reaches down with his large right hand, as if he's plucking a sunfish out of the pond, and he lifts me safely up into his arms. And when I wake up in the morning, I am still smiling.

In those days, watching about the war on TV is forbidden me. When I question my mother about it, saying we might see Daddy, she waves her hand in front of her face as if trying to brush away a bad odor. She says, "All they show is terrible stuff happening—shooting and bombs exploding and everything burning. We don't need to watch that." So if the news comes on while we're eating supper, she jumps up and switches the channel. Usually we watch reruns of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, but every once in a while she lets me watch

cartoons. When she does that—switches channels—she doesn't eat much and eventually leaves the table and goes into her bedroom. Then pretty soon I hear the voice of Walter Cronkite coming from the small black-and-white set beside her bed. And I know what she's doing.

When she comes out of her bedroom, her eyes are red and swollen and I ask her why she's so sad. She doesn't pay any attention to the question though, and instead starts getting on me for not eating my string beans, which she knows gag me worse even than broccoli and usually are put on my plate just for show.

Later that night, she comes quietly into my room, sits on the bed and kisses me. She says she's sorry for yelling at me, that no little bunch of beans is worth getting us upset at each other. Because she smells of Ivory soap, I know she's just gotten out of the tub where she like to soak when things don't go well.

Then, laughing so close to my ear her breath makes me giggle, she tells me to listen to this story about how, when Daddy's platoon was out on patrol, they found a whole field of mushrooms. As I listen I notice the letter is all wrinkled, like she'd balled it all up in her hand but then smoothed it open. I want to ask her about that, but too quickly I just get caught up in the story:

"They were like mini-umbrellas," she whispers. "And some of the men wanted to pick them and cook and eat them. But Daddy said no, they might be poison, and all the men laughed and said well maybe they could serve them to the Vietcong guerrillas because nothing else seemed to be working." She stops reading then, even though her lips continue. And from experience, I know what she's seeing isn't for my ears.

I think that was the first time I really ever heard the words "Vietcong" and "guerrillas," and I immediately associate them with King Kong. For days after that whisper, I catch myself thinking about black, hairy gorillas chasing my daddy through a field of gigantic mushrooms.

In those days my mother worked in a bookstore, but only in the mornings because she liked me coming home for lunch instead of taking it to school. She loved everything about books: the feel of the

smooth paper, the smell of the fresh print, the sound of crisply turned pages. And because they had more new books than the library, she could find anything her mind could imagine. It was like a magic carpet, she said—but one she didn't have to vacuum. And besides, they gave her a great discount on anything she bought.

So sometimes she'd buy a book for me, and even though I was a good reader myself, she still liked to read to me at night. I usually got dead sleep when she did that. But then I'd come wide awake when, after the lights were out, I'd hear the rattle of stationery in her hand and her voice dropping off to that whisper. It's like an alarm going off in my head. Now she is again telling me about my daddy, and my mind becomes like a movie camera where I can slow down her words and pictures so I can clearly see him and what he is doing.

"Listen now," she begins. "This is a funny one. He says it was sometime last month when the platoon went out on a night hike. And one of his men—it was that boy Randy whose son has the same name as yours—fell down into a big hole. I guess it was kind of like an Alice-in-Wonderland rabbit hole. And he found a treasure down there: dry clothes, a bunch of canned food and lots of guns. And when your daddy got all the treasure back to headquarters, everyone was so happy they gave a big party for him and his platoon. But then this Randy, who'd fallen into the hole, discovered he'd lost his wallet somewhere back in that hole. He got really upset too, because the only picture he had of his new baby was in that wallet."

"Maybe someone will find it for him," I say, my mind shifting into overdrive, trying to keep up with the pictures she is creating in my head.

"Well, but that's what's so funny. Because a few days later Daddy says he captured a small village about 50 clicks away, and when he inspected one of the huts he found a bag with American cigarettes, a lighter and Randy's wallet in it."

I am hanging on to the word "clicks" and seeing Daddy and his men marching along and snapping their fingers, so I am a few words behind the story, but Mom is saying something about how Daddy would have to hold on to the wallet and

A JOB THAT'S MORE THAN A JOB...

Selling
ST. ANTHONY
MESSENGER over
the telephone—
working directly
from your own
home.



It's a job that's more than a job.



In addition to
introducing the
Catholic press—
at its best—into
untold hundreds
of homes, you
are also

involved in pastoral ministry. You
counsel and comfort many who are in
need. And you earn generous
commissions and bonuses while
you're at it.

And one of the BIG
bonuses is that
very soon you find
your "job" turning
into a "career." And
a very, very
satisfying one at that.



Write me today for free, no-obligation
details about this rare opportunity,
won't you?

Fr. Peter

Fr. Peter
c/o The Franciscans
St. Anthony Messenger
1615 Republic Street,
Cincinnati, OH 45210



YES! Send me free, no-obligation
details about this exciting
Christian-career opportunity.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

return it some time later, because Randy had a bad accident and had to be sent to the hospital in Da Nang. The her voice gets softer still and more serious, and I know she is reading his exact words now.

"It's funny how close you get to these guys so quickly. Three months ago you never even knew they existed, and now you know them by a nickname, or a hometown, or by some crazy, brave, stupid thing they did. They become kinda like your family away from home. And when one of them...goes, it's like a piece of you has gone away too. Then all you have left is a remembered name, or a photograph someone took, or a wallet with a baby picture in it."

It is right after that wallet story when things start getting real confusing for me. Some people say the war is ending, but others say it is just beginning and is going to be bigger than ever before in a place called Cambodia. And a lot of nights go by before my mom comes whispering to me again, but from no letter. She says it's the post office's fault, that the mail has backed up and there isn't anything we can do about that. She says that, when you put things in an envelope and send them off, you are at the mercy of others, and all you can do is take a deep breath and pray.

It is raining that night when she turns off all but the nightlight and begins.

"Listen how soft it's raining here. It's like when you turn a hose nozzle to that really fine spray. Your daddy once told me when it rains over there, it comes down in hard, thick sheets that in a minute drench you right down to your underwear. Then, just as fast, it's over and the sun is out and sometimes there's a rainbow as wide as the whole sky. He says he thinks it's a sign that things are going to turn around pretty soon, and instead of just the wounded getting out, they'll all be coming home."

She strokes my hair for a few seconds, and then she tells me we both have to believe they're all truly coming home, and if enough people in the world believe it at the same time, then that would make a difference.

I nod that I believe, that I always have, but I'm on the way to sleep and I want to go there because I hear something in my mom's voice I've

never heard before. It's more than just loneliness, something we both feel every time we speak of him. Loneliness is always there in that bed, right between us. But now in her voice there is an uncertainty, a hesitation, almost as if she doesn't know what she is going to say to me next—even if she'd had a letter and his exact words were right there in front of her eyes.

And that night she doesn't say anything else. She just stretches out beside me, and with her face on the pillow next to mine we fall asleep. In the morning when I wake up alone, I wonder if I've just dreamed her being there. But then I feel the pillow and it is still warm from her head.

It is during the next couple of weeks that things start to change forever. She begins to talk on the phone a lot, mainly to my grandmother. Once I overhear her say something about getting a different job. She also gets her hair cut—real short, almost like mine. And more and more she stays in bed with me after the lights are off, even if there are no letters to share. I like having her there beside me, her warmth and the quiet sound of her breathing pushing me quickly and safely into sleep. I don't know if she ever goes to sleep though, because when I wake up in the mornings she is always gone.

Then one night I see she has two sheets of blue stationery clutched in her hand. I settle back on my pillow, close my eyes and wait for her to start. I can feel her back turned to me, and I know she has spread the letter out on her side of the bed so that the nightlight shines better on his words.

At first her whispers wash over me and are soothing, the sound rather than what she is saying making me feel good inside. But then I hear her voice change, as if she is having a hard time reading the words and getting them out of her throat. That's when I lift my head up and look over at her. Her head has fallen back on the pillow, and her eyes are closed, and what she is saying makes no sense to me. So I look down at the stationery spread on the bed beside her. And that's when I see that the pages are perfectly blank.

Not long after that night, maybe a week or so, when I come home from school she isn't there waiting for me.

I walk through all the rooms calling her before I decide the house is totally empty—not even a note from her telling me she'd gone to the store or is out on some errand.

I am sitting in front of the TV when my neighbor, Patty Walsh, comes in and tells me my mom is over at their house with her mother and that Patty is going to babysit me for a while. That's more than O.K. by me, because Patty is cool—a great-looking high school junior and she lets me eat whatever I want and watch any TV show.

It is after 10 o'clock when Patty finally makes me go to bed. But after putting me there and turning off even my nightlight, she does something really strange. She bends down and I feel her hair graze my face as she kisses me. It very easily could be the highlight of my entire life, except I know that there has to be some really weird reason she's done this.

I am still trying to figure out what it could be when I feel rather than hear my mom come into the room. Without the nightlight on, I can't even make out her outline, but then the mattress gives under her weight, and next I feel her cheek pressing against mine.

"Everything O.K., Mom?"

"Not everything."

Then she squeezes both my hands hard between hers and tells me in a tight but loud and strong voice about my father: how he'd taken his platoon on a night recon patrol and how they got trapped in a burned-out village and were finally overrun by hundreds of Vietcong and how it was definitely confirmed that none of the brave men from the platoon had come through it alive.

Speaking in a careful way I'd never heard her use before, she says a lot of other things to me. But I can't hang on to any of them because I begin crying so hard I can't hear. And I feel as if I am going to drown in my own tears. But what is worse is that I know now I have no Daddy to reach down his hand to save me.

Since that night, not a single day has gone by that I haven't probably thought of my father. When I got an A on my report card it was mostly for him. When I made the high school basketball team, it was a lot for him. Even when I graduated from college it was more

for him than for Mom or me. And my son Adam proudly carries on his name.

That night is also the night that the whispering stopped. Never again would my mother speak to me in that special way. It was as if her soft voice had died right along with my father in that lightless jungle.

Perhaps my mother stopping it the way she did, and then my son starting it up again with his question about his grandfather, has everything to do with why I'm finally drawn to the Wall. So it isn't too long after the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial that I call my mother. She has remarried—a professor she'd met while going to night school to finish up her degree. They now live in Lawrence, Kansas, where he teaches literature.

Anyway, I tell her I feel I have to go visit the Wall, and she says it's a good idea, something I should do for both of us. Over the phone her voice sounds very far away as she says she plans to see it too someday, but that now the time isn't right for her, that some walls are harder to get over than others. I listen to her and love her for still loving him that strongly down through the years.

So in late spring I take the journey to D.C. alone, filled with rumors from

others and from TV coverage of what I will see, how I'll feel. But none of their words touch me the way the first sight of that Wall does. As I pass by the large bronze statue of the three infantrymen gazing forever at the Wall, I am stunned: by the size of it, by the thousands and thousands of names etched across it, by the shimmering pure blackness of its cold granite.

I feel light-headed, and it isn't for a while until I realize the dizziness is because I am holding my breath as I approach it. So for the next 10 minutes, I pace along the path above the Wall, where all I can see are the lonely and sad faces searching for their familiar names.

Then I go and stand in line at one of the directories where I can look up my father's place on the Wall, what panel and what line is his. Still, I don't go directly to him even after I've got the information. I hang back, standing behind the lines of people walking along the concrete pathway.

And I watch: a woman about my age trying to trace a name off the Wall and onto a picture of a young man in a Marine uniform; a lady about my mom's age in a black hat with a lace veil over her face, leaving a holy card in front of her person's place; a

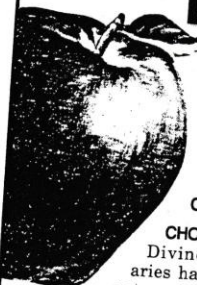
bearded man in an old, faded fatigue jacket plastered with medals, reciting a poem about the Mekong Delta; a cluster of people hugging each other and crying.

It is very busy at the Wall.

Slowly I make my way along it toward Panel 12 West. Once there I have to pause before counting down to line 33. His name, Adam Carpenter, is in the middle. There is no rank indicating he was a First Lieutenant, nor is there a date of death. Just his name is there, which is the way it is, the way it should be. Here it doesn't matter if you were a general or a private, a leader or a follower, whether you died first or last or in the long in-between. On this Wall, all are equal in their honor.

For a long time I simply stand staring at his name, and all the while my mind is flooded with these brightly lit memories and softly echoing voices. Then, finally, I inch my way up next to him, and with my lips nearly touching the granite, I whisper my father's name.

Joseph Pici, a professor of English at the University of Dayton, has written over 35 short stories and three novels. "Whispers" is Pici's fifth story published in St. Anthony Messenger. He lives with his wife and two children in Dayton, Ohio.



PICK A WINNER AND GET A BONUS!

CHOOSE A DIVINE WORD GIFT ANNUITY

CHOOSE SATISFACTION - Your Gift Annuity works through Divine Word Missionaries in their efforts to inspire the poor of the world with hope through the message of Jesus.

CHOOSE A BONUS - You get a bonus for each regular gift annuity of \$500 or more.

CHOOSE HIGH RATES - Divine Word Missionaries have provided high rates with stable and dependable service through their annuity program since 1904. **We guarantee you a steady income with prompt payments for the rest of your life.**

CHOOSE TAX-BREAKS - You get tax-breaks on your gift and on subsequent payments.

Please write **TODAY** for more information. There are **NO OBLIGATIONS**, and your inquiry is kept **CONFIDENTIAL!**



Father Joseph Knoebel, SVD
Divine Word Missionaries
Techy, Illinois 60082 Ph (708) 272-7600

SA

Please send me more information about Divine Word Gift Annuities. I also want to receive a personalized information sheet for a ☐ SINGLE LIFE or a ☐ JOINT/SURVIVORSHIP ANNUITY in the amount of ☐ \$500, ☐ \$1,000, ☐ \$5,000, ☐ \$10,000 or ☐ _____.

Name _____ Telephone _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Area Code _____ Zip _____

Birthdate _____ ☐ Male ☐ Female

Birthdate _____ ☐ Male ☐ Female

(ONE birthdate for Single Life Annuity; TWO for Joint/Survivorship Annuity)

