

Family

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Ann could not take one more lecture on leaving out the comma before the word *and* in written text, so she slipped out the front door of the hotel after lunch and hailed a cab. She was in Washington, D.C. to attend a conference on writing style in government documents. The research and development company where she worked in Ohio had won a contract to work on alternative energy sources, and her boss thought Ann would be wise to attend this conference.

She told the cab driver that she wanted to go to the Vietnam War Memorial. Ann never supported the war, but it was the first place that came to mind as she climbed into the cab, and besides, the war was a part of her history. She remembered the rallies, and the way students closed down entire campuses with sit-down strikes. She remembered riots. Although she never went as far as to call soldiers baby killers, she knew people who did.

She wanted to see The Wall even though she did not need anymore memorabilia; she had been as close as she ever wanted to get to the War with the reports on the evening news. She had seen the helicopters land, soldiers carrying their guns as they ran up hills with their backpacks, and the black body bags. In one of her classes in junior high, a boy brought in an audiotaped letter from his father who was a doctor stationed in Saigon. As his father talked on the tape, the students could hear explosions and the reports of rifles in the background. Ann never went to the War movies or bought the books that were so popular now. She had her own memories and her own opinions.

Ann remembered a boy she had a crush on in high school. Joe always made her laugh, even though she did not think that he had noticed her. Although one time at a church youth group meeting, she and a group of others slipped out the back. Joe was one of the people in the group. They started pitching pennies against a curb behind the church. Ann remembered that Joe told her she was a "pretty good" penny pitcher. She floated on that comment for a couple of weeks. Joe turned eighteen during the fall

of his senior year. Shortly after his birthday, he received a letter that commanded him to get his physical exam for the military. In June he just disappeared without even attending graduation. Nobody asked too many questions about where he went.

"Look, Lady, the Memorial is just over that hill there," the cab driver said as he pulled up to the curb. Ann thanked him and paid the fare. As she walked over the top of the hill, the sun glistened off the shiny black surface of the monument. It was not as tall as she expected, but she was amazed at all of the things that were left at the base. There were teddy bears, little American flags, letters, poems, American flags, roses, flags, worn-out combat boots, scuffed baby shoes, and flags, a lot of flags.

Ann paused next to a young woman who had a sheet of paper covering a name. She was rubbing the lead of a pencil over it. She looked at Ann with a bright smile and said, "He was my father." He was my father, Ann thought. The woman could not have been more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Ann smiled and nodded and ambled on. All the young woman knew of her father was a stenciled name off the Wall.

Ann thought of her father. They fought quite often when she was younger. They argued about the length of her skirts, about when she was supposed to be in at night, about who she dated and the length of their hair. They even fought about who she did not date. He also taught her how to reel in a fish and how to drive a car.

Ann stretched out her arm and let her finger tips drift along the names as she walked. She was amazed at all of the names, names of fathers, brothers, uncles, sons—Ted Reynolds, John Richardson, Gilbert Rodgers. All of them fighting to get back to newborns who they had not yet met, to wives, to sisters, to cousins, to parents, to grandparents. All of them fighting to get back, fighting to win. Ann looked at her watch. It was time to get back to the world of commas and *and*'s. But first, when she got back to the hotel, she was going to go to her room and call her father.