

Army Dad

By ReadWorks



Nicholas Sutter was the only one in his fifth grade class whose dad had died. Well, been killed. Trent Sutter had been in the army, stationed in Iraq, since 2010. An official from the army knocked on the Sutters' door at 3 p.m. on April 9, 2011, and gave Nicholas's mom the news. It had been an IED—an “improvised explosive device”—set off by an approaching vehicle. The army official tried to assure Nicholas's mom that her husband had died instantly and painlessly.

The TV was on in the living room, and Nicholas was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, holding his baby sister Lily on his lap. She kept tugging on his shoelaces and trying to crawl away, but Nicholas didn't let her. He watched his mom's back and the front door with the official's silhouette out of the corner of his eye, but was otherwise focusing all his attention on the TV. He tried to block out the sounds from the doorway, even though he knew what the visit meant. His mom had tried to prepare him for it ever since he was old enough to realize that his dad's long absences meant he was at war.

The Looney Tunes were playing on TV; an old Bugs Bunny cartoon showed Bugs running in circles around the hunter. If Nicholas couldn't hear the conversation, then did it actually happen? Bugs was chewing on a long, orange carrot, but Nicholas was thinking of the last time he and his dad were alone together. They had gone to the beach a few days before he left for Iraq and held hands as they walked down into the surf. The water was freezing, and his dad picked Nicholas up so he wouldn't get the bottoms of his pants wet. Nicholas felt like Superman, flying above the ocean civilization, held up by his dad's strength and his dad's love.

Nicholas could hear the conversation at the front door beginning to wind down. Before his mom got a chance to say goodbye to the official, Nicholas turned off the TV, picked up his

baby sister, and ran to the bathroom, where he locked the door and climbed into the bathtub. He held Lily up and looked at her face closely. She had the same color eyes as his dad—deep blue—and people said she had his dad’s nose too. It was hard to imagine Lily’s nose on his dad’s face, but Nicholas tried. And then he realized it was hard to imagine his dad’s face at all, as it actually was, smiling and talking. It was as if his dad was just a picture, unmoving and static.

Tears welled up in Nicholas’s eyes. Lily reached out and poked his cheek with her fist. He pulled her close to him and held her tightly before she started to fuss.

There was a knock of the door. “Nicky?” his mom said. “Why is this door locked? Can you come out here for a sec?”

Nicholas hugged Lily even closer and breathed in her baby smell.

His mom banged on the door again. “Nick? If you won’t come out here to talk, can you at least set Lily free?”

Nicholas took a deep breath. “Is he dead?” he yelled. Lily’s face scrunched up at the loud sound, and she started wailing. His mom pounded on the door, but Nicholas couldn’t hear if she was saying anything. He patted Lily’s back, and she stopped crying. Soon the pounding stopped, too.

He climbed out of the bathtub and opened the door. His mom was sitting against the wall across from the bathroom with her head in her hands.

“Is it true, Mom?” he said.

She looked up at him and reached for Lily. “Yes,” she said.

Nicholas leaned down and gave her the baby.

“We’ll be okay, Nicky,” she said. She was crying, too.

Nicholas looked down at her for another moment and then went to his bedroom and stared at the ceiling until it got dark. He was glad his mom had left him alone. Before he fell asleep that night, he tried to remember that day at the beach in more detail. A seagull had carried off their chips. His dad had thrown him in the air and caught him on the way down. His mom, who was pregnant with Lily, had joined them as the sun set. Nicholas watched the sunset with his family, happy they were all together.