

GINA BARNHURSTS LETTER TO HER SON:

Dearest Eric,

It's three months today since the moment my world was shattered. I'm sitting here at Arlington in front of your headstone -- bundled up in a blanket with mittens on, writing to you. But I don't care what I look like; I don't care who is around. All I care about is talking to you.

I'm sure you're yelling at me for sitting here in the snow shivering -- but it's where I have to be. I feel closest to you here at Arlington. I miss you so much! Your brother and sister miss you too, and that breaks my heart even more. I need to know everyone's OK. I know you are, but I can't feel it. There is a mountain of pain in the way.

I wanted to celebrate your homecoming. I wanted to take you in my arms and tell you how proud I am of you, and then I wanted to take you home and spoil you! Instead, I'm coming to the cemetery every Sunday; I'm honoring you here, I'm talking to you here. I am kissing and hugging your headstone.

I am so proud that you have a place of honor in Arlington National Cemetery -- you are an American Hero. I'm proud that you are buried here, but so very sad -- not at 20 years old! You were supposed to live 'til you were 90!! You were supposed to have a career, get married, have your own children.

This week the reality of you being gone was so stark. I get fleeting relief from people's kindness -- a phone call, a note, a smile, a hug. Then it comes crashing down again. I just want to sit with my emptiness.

You are gone and I can't fill that hole. And yet I do feel peace from being here in front of your grave with the beautiful headstone, sitting in front of all the other graves -- surrounded by American Heroes. I miss you so much but the memories can't be taken away... I'll always remember the way you made me laugh, the way you horsed around with Matt, your sensitivity, your handsome face.

Eric, your Marine brothers are finally home! They came for the weekend. I decorated the house with Welcome Home banners and balloons and stars. It was the welcome I wanted to give you. We laughed, we cried, we ate, we hugged -- and we ended our weekend by seeing you at Arlington. We held each other and cried together.

It's a terrible grief they've been keeping bottled inside. They've seen and done things that no one should be forced to see or do. Eric, you need to watch over your brothers. They need someone to talk to, someone to listen to them. Push them my way -- it helps me to still feel a part of you.

Last Sunday I met some wonderful people -- Beth and Michael Belle. They lost their son Nicolas two years ago in Afghanistan. He was a marine also. We are trying to form a support group. We moms need each other.

We need to talk and share stories about our babies. We need to laugh and cry and hug each other through this. I'm alone now -- and there's such a peacefulness about this place. It's quiet and beautiful and special. I can pour out my heart to you and know you hear me. Here it is you and me and God. It is ice cold and snow is coming down in a blizzard. But I will not leave you.

As I write that, you answer me by shining down the most brilliant sun. It shines right in my eyes -- you are definitely telling me you're OK. You are bathed in God's light... I know it is you. I know you are saying Hi to me.

Well Eric, the guard just came and told me the cemetery was closing so I'll go, but I'll be back next week. And I know you hear me everywhere, but you understand that right now I hear you better here. So my sweet child, I'll write again soon. I love you with all my heart and soul and being.

Love always and forever,
Mom