

LAURIE ANN DOYLE

## As If

The nurse looks at me as she's weighing Nicky. "Are you the mother?" she asks. Not his mother, but the mother. As if I was a cow, Nicky, a calf. As if she didn't have a clue. The time before that it was the lady at the frozen yogurt place. Before that, the man behind us in line at Safeway. Everyone wants to know.

Nicky and I couldn't look less alike. His skin's beige, what some people call olive. Mine's bright white, the kind you can almost see through. And Nicky's thick hair is black. Mine, red filling up with gray. His fingers, they're long, beautifully long. Fingers that could have never sprouted from our family tree. We've got stubs, thick things with big nails. Drew, my ex, has them, too. On a man, they look strong, ready for work. Hah. The man hates work. On me, they're just plain ugly.

The way Nicky leans his nine-year-old body away from the nurse and me and gets real quiet, I wonder if the question bothers him, too. So, driving home, I tell him. Again. "Your mother," I say, "the first one, she wanted the best for you. She was working three jobs, sending money home to family on the East Coast. The woman had no time, no man, no savings. Nothing a baby needs." In the rear view mirror I see him turning his face away. Used to be he liked me talking like this. Used to be he asked to hear it again. "Nicky," I say a little louder, "your mother couldn't raise you. That's why she found me. On the very day you were born in Highland Hospital, she found me to be your mother."

Nicky doesn't say anything.

The boy needs a story. Like every other kid, he needs to hear about the day he was born, how he made his way from one body to the next, his own story. He should know he didn't just appear one day in his white bassinet, or grew magically out of his car seat. He has a mother. Okay, two mothers. I try not to make a big deal about it. I say, "One mother lives with you in Oakland, California." The other? "The other," I say, "moved back to New York. A place you and I might visit someday."

These aren't lies. They're just stories.

Lately, I'll be reading and find myself looking up. Nicky will be edging himself around the corner, eyelashes dark in his face. Sometimes he'll come close, press his toes into mine. Mostly he stays far. Either way it seems his body's asking Who are you? Where's she? Questions too big for his mouth. They leak out his eyes, his ears, the place under his t-shirt where the skin whirrs. But he never says anything, so I usually start making stuff up. Nicky's hungry. Tired. But if I ask does his stomach hurt, how was school, tease him about his pink birthmark, he's liable to walk right out of the room. So I try to stay quiet too, fix him a peanut butter banana sandwich and some hot cocoa, and set them in front of the TV. Nicky'll watch TV all day if I let him. Mr. Meaty. The Fairly Odd Parents. The Kid Next Door.

This much I do know. The day after Nicky was born, his mother walked out of the hospital "for a quick cigarette," and never came back. The nurses found a note lying next to Nicky on the bed. Just one word "Sorry—." The handwriting was neat, every letter lined up. I think about that word, what she meant. Sorry for who? Him? Me? Her own self?

The hospital social worker called us. Why I have no idea. Maybe because we'd been on the county list for so long. Drew was forty-five and me, forty-two, and somebody decided time was running out. Maybe it was because our house was right across the street from the hospital. 321445 East 31st. The one with

white roses out front. All I know is I crossed the street and ten minutes later I was a mother. The nurses kept giving me stuff. Blankets, bottles, booties. They even offered the note they'd found on the bed and the half pack of Marlboros in the drawer. Why not? I took everything.

I pull in the driveway from the doctor's office. Nicky jumps out and runs to the front door. He's in such a hurry, that boy. When Nicky's umbilical cord fell off, I saved it. His newborn hat, the one he was wearing when we got him, I kept that, too. I saved all his baby stuff. The worn spit rags, the chewed-on sippy cups, the milk-stained undershirts. Used to be he liked this history I made for him. Now he says, "That's okay, Mom. Seen 'em."

Maybe I should have left well enough alone. If Nicky doesn't care, why should I? That's what the girls in the office said. But I couldn't help it. It wasn't just the way that nurse looked at me the other day, the way Nicky leaned away. It wasn't just strangers always wanting to know. It's those things, plus. Plus what? Hard to say what exactly. Nicky's birth certificate, the one they sent months after he was born, isn't real. Lists me and Drew as the parents, like there never was anybody else. It's been bothering me for a long while now.

When Nicky was three, he climbed up under my shirt. He didn't say anything, just stuck his head in, stretching the white cotton way out.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "What?"

After a while he said, "I want to get born out of you."

I tried not to laugh. My flab. My flesh. I felt sad and happy all at once. Nothing about my feelings add up.

I have to meet her, that's all. The woman whose body gave me his. And besides, someday Nicky's going to want the truth, or need the truth, if only for something medical. There are agencies all over the place on the Internet now that'll do the searching for you. The one I picked found out everything. So fast, at first I didn't believe it. But everything matches up. Dates, location. Nicky's mother's not in New York like I'd imagined. She lives up in Clear Lake, just a couple hours north of here. In some town called Nice. Her name is Lynetta. Lynetta Desilva. Next Sunday, I'm driving up.

Drew shows up at six on Wednesday, pretending that he hasn't the foggiest it's getting to be suppertime. I don't throw him out. There's plenty of rosemary chicken and creamer potatoes and French cut green beans to go around. I set down a plate at his old spot at the table. He's the closest thing to a father Nicky's got.

I carefully put down another fork, knife, spoon. Maybe someday she'll also be sitting, I think, her long fingers wrapped around this spoon, helping herself to beet salad or whatever I've fixed up. When Nicky was a baby, we took him to Clear Lake once. We stayed in a "Linger Longer" cottage so small you could spit from one end to the other without trying. The lake was soupy green and lined with trailer parks. I remember a blue and silver trailer, a single-wide with wood piled under the steps, and a dog barking. We drove on by. Drew and I drove by everything.

Nicky picks at his food, like always. When I offer him berry cobbler, he shakes his head no. Does the same when I ask if he's okay. Well, I can't make whatever's inside him come out. Nicky's one to talk when he wants to. I let him be excused.

Over coffee, Drew starts up. "Don't tell me you're still thinking of driving up there."

"That boy takes everything in. Someday he'll want to find out. He was listening to me the other day at the doctor's office. How I couldn't fill out the family history because he doesn't have one. I didn't mean it like that."

“Could be worse,” Drew says. “My dad never came home from the war.”

“It’s not the same,” I say. “You have photos, memories your mother’s told you.”

“Who knows what you’re going to find, Casey. Then what?”

“Truth is,” I say, “I’m not just going for Nicky’s sake. I’m going for mine, too.” I’ve never told Drew about the blank feeling I have under my ribs, between my hips. For years, I tried to coax a baby from my body. Drew had swimmers all over the place. Me, they gave pills, shots, tests every morning to pull the darkness out. Suddenly Nicky showed up. Carrying him out of the hospital, I burst into the tears. The nurses followed me down the hall, asking, “Everything all right? Can we help?” I said I was crying from happiness, but it was only part true. I was in shock.

“You got your beautiful boy. What else could you want?”

I don’t let the words “faithful husband” fly out of my mouth. “That woman gave us that beautiful boy,” I say. “That makes her some part family. I’d like to meet her. At least be able to call up a face.”

Right after Nicky was born, we looked like any other family strolling around Lake Merritt, picking out a high chair at Costco, eating Chinese Friday nights. I used to put a hat on Nicky to hide all that black hair. People’d say, “He looks like you. The round eyes. His chin.” I’d smile, touch my fingers to his.

Drew tilts back from the dinner table. “Nobody in my family’d walk out and leave a little baby like that.”

“That’s right. You were real good at sticking around.”

“Give me a break. For once in your sweet life, Casey.”

Drew’s getting up to leave when I see Nicky half-in and half-out of the shadow of the kitchen door, listening.

Cripes! I didn’t want him finding out like this. I was going to tell him. I was. As soon as I knew myself.

“Nicky—” I stretch out my hand. “That you?”

He walks past me and sits at the table with his shoulders all hiked up. I go to smooth the hair spiking up off the top of his head but stop myself. Those shoulders are way too skitterish.

“You hear anything you want to talk about?” I ask.

“Don’t go there, Casey,” Drew says. “Just asking for trouble.”

“Did my mother really walk out and leave me?” Nicky says.

“Nicky,” and the same dumb thing comes out. “Your mother wanted the best for you.” I slow down and think. “Nobody knows what happened. Not even the doctors and nurses.”

Nicky starts rolling a white ball back and forth on the table, the one with the green eyeball floating inside it. It stares up at me.

After Drew moved out, the house got too big. Silence fell down and coated everything white. Table legs, spoons, the television. Blank white. Then Nicky got up from his nap and the house got too small. The press me Old McDonald songs, the graham cracker goo on the supposed-to-be-washable tablecloth, the little socks whose mates up and disappeared. I’d take Nicky and me to the mall. There I’d find myself wondering. That her? That woman in the blue print? Hair’s right. Or that one with the nice hands pushing a stroller? Baby Nicky smiled and waved at just everybody.

The stories got born then. At first, not really stories. Just pictures, floating across my brain. Chewed fingernails, black polish. The rest fills in like a dream. A girl walking back and forth in a room on the ninth floor in Highland. Maternity. She touches a wall, pressing her long fingers into it. She leans her forehead against the plaster. Leans. Her black hair’s so short it sticks straight out. Her clothes—high tops, jeans belted together with a long piece of string, a big man’s white t-shirt—lie crumpled in the corner. Her belly’s so big it pulls her across the room. There’s shame in that body, the way she holds her elbows close.

Maybe she thought California'd be different. Easier. Nicky's mother sneaks a cigarette in the tiny hospital bathroom, flicks the butt in the bloody toilet water but it won't flush down. Later, the nurse comes in. "You have to stop the screaming," she says. "I know it hurts, but you mustn't bother the others." They give her something, and then something else and something else, and finally Nicky burns his way down. When he's half-out, he pushes his arms wide, but now there's no fleshy wall to hold him. His long fingers spread, and he cries. She hates the way he cries.

"You okay?" I say to Nicky.

"I guess." He rolls the eyeball away from me.

"Want to come with me to meet her?"

"Don't ask him that," Drew says. "How's a nine-year-old supposed to answer a question like that?"

The eyeball travels back and forth a whole other time before Nicky speaks. "No," he says.

"Okay if I do?"

"If you want." Nicky's dark eyes find mine and for a moment I see him as if I'd never seen him before. A boy who likes to play baseball, watch a movie with popcorn, fly a kite but only with lots of string. A boy who wants to be like any other. Have one mother, not two. But he doesn't say anything more, just goes on up to bed.

Crossing the Carquinez bridge, I look out on the bay. It's perfectly still, not a boat, not a wave. In Vallejo, I stop at Vip's florist. It was Drew's idea. When he realized he couldn't talk me out of going, he got so he wouldn't let me fail. "Call her," he said. "Give the woman a little warning."

"You don't know me," I said, "but I'm the one who—" and there came a hard click. The second time, worse. I'd barely got to the word Highland she said, her voice ugly in my ear, "Don't you ever call again." That voice is all up in my body now. It buzzed all night, rolling me over and over in the sheets. The woman probably won't even let me in. Forget it, I decided. One mother's enough, I told myself. Plenty. Ask anybody.

In the morning I realized I can't call it off. Now Nicky knows. What would I tell him? His mother, the one who takes care of him every day, is scared? Wouldn't even give it a shot? I got in the car and drove off alone.

And now, flowers. "Nobody'd slam the door in the face of somebody delivering flowers," Drew said. At Vip's, I pick out the brightest bouquet in the shop. All pink. Mr. Vip wants to make sure I know their names: Gerber daisies, fluffed pink carnations, miniature tulips, and strings of sweet something or other. He rings me up himself. The flowers fill the footwell, pink eyes vibrating in all directions.

North of Calistoga, the road rises up into hairpin curves and drop-offs so steep I try not to look. Just drive, I tell myself. Drive. I try to listen to music, but nothing sounds good. Near the top, the white shoebox I sat on the seat slides and spills. Scattered in the flowers now are Nicky's newborn cap, the crumpled pack of Marlboros, Lynetta's penciled note. The red spot on his baby hat looks up at me. It's blood, I decided a long time ago. His or hers, it doesn't matter because at that point it was pretty much the same. I've always hated the expression "blood is thicker than water." What else is blood thicker than? The five-by-seven photo of Nicky looks up at me, too. The one from first grade where the camera caught him in a big grin. Both front teeth missing.

At Middletown, the road flattens out and big oak trees draw up close. Maybe her hair isn't black, but blonde. Or red, like mine. Well, probably not red. Maybe she's got kids, other kids, trikes and Sit 'n Spins and Hello Kitty shoes on the front steps. Maybe she watches people's children for money. I've done it myself. Maybe she's got herself an education, a husband. Maybe that's why Nicky's mother didn't want to talk to me.

There's no good word for what she is. I am. Adoptive mother sounds like Nicky's a dog or a cat and I could give him back. I'd never do that. Birthmother's worse. All I have to do is look at Nicky, the clean line of his jaw, the thin legs and long fingers and see that she gave him way more than birth. The woman may have left, but she's not gone.

I looked in the dictionary once. Whole bunch of entries under mother. The first, of course, was a female that's borne offspring. Next was something weird, stringy cells floating on top of fermentation. Like afterbirth, it said. The list went on and on. Mother Goose, Mother Hubbard, motherland, Mother of pearl, mother superior, mother tongue. Mother Nature. Mother's Day sat right about middle.

Clear Lake looms into view. Mount Konocti rises on the far shore shaped like a sleeping woman, her long hair spreading north. The lake is anything but clear. In the '90s, some fool decided water lilies would be pretty and infected the lake with Hydrilla. The lake's slimy with the weed now. Can't see your feet once you're in past your knees.

I keep driving north on the state road until I get to Nice. Like the lake, the town isn't. There's a boarded-up Tastee-Freez, Ed's Easy Does It. A bar, I guess. Pretty soon, I see Lynetta's street, El Camino. The road climbs uphill, twisting all the way. At the Newlove Trailer Park, I slow down but it's not it. At the top, the street ends in a bunch of townhouses. I find an empty space to park and sit. This place is nice. Nicer than I'd expected. Green clapboard with blue trim, pink azaleas. My heart starts thumping in my ears. What am I doing here? You can't change the past. So leave, I say to myself. Just go. Tell Nicky Sorry honey, she wasn't home. Besides, the numbers on these townhouses make no sense. Completely out of order.

Then I see. The buildings are clumped A, B, C, D to whatever. I jump out of the car before my mind can start any more tricks. It would be wrong to make Nicky find her first. I cut across lawns and under carports. 215899 El Camino turns out to be way over in S. Nicky's mother's porch light's on, though it's nearly noon. The steps are bare and clean. When I walk up, a dog sticks his nose under the fence and begins to bark.

The door opens. "For you," I say, holding the flowers in front of my face.

"Really?" Nicky's mother's voice is high and happy like his can get.

"I'd be glad to bring them in, if you'd like," I say.

"All right."

Her place is dark. Only one strip of sun makes it through the shades to light up the blue rug. In front of an oversized sofa sits a coffee table neatly lined with Sunset, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping. Some of the same I read. Everything in Lynetta's house is blue, the rug, the sofa, strangely, even some of the magazine covers. No toys, just long stretches of quiet room. Against the far wall, a fish tank glows.

"Where would you like me to set them?"

Nicky's mother takes the bouquet and suddenly her face is in front mine. Her mouth forms that same pink square Nicky's does when he's happy. The woman's good looking, olive like him. She's got his same head of thick black hair, too, though silver's winning out. Wrinkles pull at the corners of her eyes. Nicky's mother is not young at all. She's middle-aged, like me. I try to smile back.

She picks through the flowers with her long fingers, searching for a card. "Who are they from?"

"Your son." Even though I've practiced these two words over and over in my head they come out like I want to hurt her. I don't.

"I don't have a son."

I go to place the penciled note in her hand, but it flutters to the floor.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody. Me." Well, not just me, I think. Nicky's quietness. And Drew, though he'd never admit it.

“I don’t have to talk to you.”

“Want me to go back and tell him that?” That came out the way I meant it to. Firm, but not mean.

“Let’s not do this. Please.”

“Twenty minutes is all, I swear, Lynetta. For Nicky’s sake.”

“Who?” Her forehead wrinkles. “Oh.”

“His whole name is Nicolas O’Connor Walsh. O’Connor for my side.”

She goes to sit on the couch. I follow. I realize Nicky’s mother’s touched everything in this room. The cushion of this couch. The edge of this table. The wood-paneled walls. I wonder about the invisibilities that bodies leave behind. Cells, things smaller than cells.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. You did call. Even so I’d always thought if anyone ever showed up, it’d be him. Not you.” She shrugs her shoulders like Nicky does when he doesn’t want to talk but will let you. Strange how he has her gestures, too. Nicky’s mother has on blue linen shorts, sharply pressed. Her yellow blouse is all tucked in. I have on my usual, cut-offs and flip flops. White flip flops. I pick up an April Sunset and put it down. I hide my feet.

I’d planned all sorts of easy questions for at first. Like “Where do you work?” and “Does it get real hot up here?” and something about the price of gasoline. But the way she lifts her shoulders and sets them down again reminds me again of Nicky.

“What was it like?”

“What?” Nicky’s mother looks down at my thick fingers and I tuck them in the crook of my elbows.

“Him being born.”

She laughs. “You want to know that?”

Maybe Nicky’s first breath wasn’t a scream after all. Maybe he didn’t push out the air, hoping to find something to push against. Maybe he stared out of two swollen eyes, his quiet emptying the room. Maybe his first breath was soft, kittenish. I’ve imagined so many things I’ve lost track. Here was the woman who knew. “I do,” I say.

Nicky’s mother looks up at the ceiling. “They plopped him on my chest first thing. He was still gooey, and his eyes, they looked right up at me. Then he clamped down on my left breast. Hard. Harder than I thought a newborn could. Like he’d never let go. It hurt. The nurses kept saying what a good little eater he was.”

Lynetta’s voice is even-toned, as if the story belongs to somebody else. I want to say Nicky doesn’t eat like that anymore. I have to beg food into that boy. But her shoulders say keep quiet. The fish tank bubbles away.

She evens out the corners of the magazines. “When are you going to get to the real question?”

“The real question?”

“Why I left.”

“I was working up to that.” I pull the half-pack of Marlboros from my purse and place it gently in front of her. “The nurses gave me that, too.”

“I quit. Right after ...”

“... he was born?”

“Look. I don’t have all day.”

“Okay. Why’d you take off?”

She reaches for the Marlboros and slides one out. And in. “I don’t know. Maybe I realized the baby wouldn’t bring him back.”

“Your husband.”

“No, no. Robert. We met before my divorce was final. I fell hard, harder than I should of. Robert was the C.E.O. of the hospital in Santa Rosa. He’d said once he wanted kids.”

She sighs, her blouse billowing out. I imagine Nicky growing in the flesh under that stiff cotton. His soft bones bumping against hers.

“Right before I was due, Robert moved out. God knows where. Took every shoe, every book. I was frantic. Highland was a place I knew no one would know me. Where no one would ask questions. When I got home, I told some story about the baby not making it. Everybody felt sorry for me, even my ex.”

Sorry. That word.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says. “I nearly went back. It was a lovely day, clear and hot and blue, the way Oakland can get in May. The shade was cool and I just kept walking in it. I’m not stupid. I knew people would line up for a healthy baby. You did.”

“Don’t you wonder about him?”

She focuses her brown eyes in on mine. “I had no interest in starting over. By myself. I knew what a kid took. And I already had a daughter to worry about. Alexandra. After she turned twenty-one, I moved up here to manage a hotel. I like living alone. I do. I can cook. Not cook. Read all night. Sleep in. Nobody bothers me.”

Maybe if Lynetta sees what he looks like, I think. I pull out the big photo of Nicky, all smile and gappy teeth.

She looks at it blankly. “He’s a cute boy. You must be doing a good job.”

Her compliment comes way too easily, like she wants us done. Like maybe if she tells me something nice I’ll clear out. I feel Nicky’s mother leaving him, leaving us, all over again. Something rises to the surface. Something impatient and smooth and hungry. I feel it pushing, wanting.

“Wouldn’t you like to see your cute boy?”

“Not really.”

It’s like air being let out of a balloon. Everything around me turns silent, ordinary, and blue. This woman couldn’t care less about Nicky. And him—I hadn’t thought about Nicky having a father somewhere—him, too. I lay my head back on the couch and let it rest there a while. A big-eyed fish swims to the corner of the tank.

“I go by Lynn Davis now, you know,” she says.

I watch the fish.

“I guess this isn’t what you wanted to hear.”

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Well, you were the one who asked.” She hands me back the cigarettes.

“What do you want me to tell Nicky?”

“Say whatever you want,” she says. “You’re his mother.”

“And you?”

She stands and looks down at me. “Listen, if it helps any, go ahead and act as if.”

“As if? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know, pretend. Act as if I didn’t exist. I can’t do either of you any good.” She smiles for a moment, and goes to open the front door.

I want to say something before I leave. Tell her I’m sorry things turned out the way they did and that guy’s a jerk and I’m so glad she brought Nicky into the world. My world. All I do is mumble “Good-bye.”

At the bottom of the hill, instead of turning onto the highway I drive straight ahead to the lake. I pull up in front of a covered walkway, pretty, lined with hanging baskets of pink geraniums. I sit there a while looking out at the water, and then get out of the car. The sun is right overhead and it burns my hair. I remember that feeling as a child, hair so hot it felt red. Which it was. Gray's not all that different. My feet move me towards the lake. The sand's fine and white and I know it had to have been put there for tourists. In my flip flops, I feel its cold under layer.

Clear Lake got so low once I heard you could walk all the way across. At the foot of Mountain Konocti, a cave appeared, then a cavern, and then a hidden lake. Not as big as Clear Lake, but still big. The creatures inside were all blind and bright white.

I know Lynetta, or Lynn, or whoever she is now, is right. I know that when I walk through that door, Nicky's quiet-eyed face is going to find mine and want to know what happened. Even if he won't ask. I'm the only one he can be sure of. His mother. The woman's wrong, too. Another story tilted on its head isn't going to fill up this new emptiness. The truth. I don't even know her real last name. Or his. All these things bump up against each other, all these wrongs and rights— they've got to live together under the same old roof. The water is warm and ugly. I step in.