¶ Poydras Review

Once By The Pacific

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Dear Nicky,

I am your father. You probably think ill of me, if you think of me at all. But here I am. And I've been thinking about you. So I'm writing to offer you a deal.

I've learned through the Internet that you've been accepted as a freshman at the University of Virginia. I'm guessing you could use some money.

I have the means to guarantee four fully paid years of college. But there's a condition. Before I pay the big bucks, you must fly out to California. You must meet...

... Your father

A check for $1000, signed by Reynolds James, is folded in the letter.

"Send it back," my mother says.

"He says he'll pay for my college," I say.

"Don't trust him!" She's in my face. "He ran out on you and two-timed me."

"Mom, I want to go to college. How else am I going to get there?"

"Get a job."

"Like you, at ten dollars an hour?" We've been over this road for months, ever since I got accepted. She doesn't want me to go to college. She's afraid I won't come back.

"You smarter than me," she says. "You can get secretary work."

"I'm going, Mama."

She's holding onto me. I can feel how hot her face is. "Don't go!"

I kiss the top of her head. "It's just a visit, Mama."

"I know him," she says. "You don't."

"That's why I got to go," I say.

Because he's out there, thinking about me, waiting for me. Because he's my daddy and I've been wanting a daddy all my life.

~

"What did he look like?" I ask Mama shortly before I take off for California. She'd cut all his pictures out of the album and burned them.

We're sitting together on the porch swing after dinner. She's brought a beer out from the kitchen and every once in a while she puts the can up against her forehead to cool herself off. Her flip-flops don't reach the floor.

"Red hair, curly. About six feet. Athletic. He was a looker. Body like a baseball player, if you know what I mean, long and thin, butt sticking out. You favor him."

"My butt does *not* stick out."

I do have one memory. He's picking me up, holding me high above his head. We're in a room, could be our same tiny living room. And he picks me up, light as a feather, he says, and holds me high until my fingers brush the ceiling. I remember looking down at Mama, so far down, so small, and she's laughing. They both are. He has a big bushy mustache, I remember that.

That's it. You don't remember much before two, when he took off and never so much as wrote a word or sent a dime's worth of support or even remembered my birthday. Every year I'd pretend he was just about to walk in the door, holding a

Barbie or a puppy or a charm bracelet. And he'd smile at me and say, Happy Birthday, Nicky.

"How come he left?" I ask Mama.

"He two-timed me." It's the same answer she's been giving me ever since I was old enough to ask.

"Look," I say. "I'm about to risk my life on an airplane crossing the country to see this man. I need to know more than that."

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"Okay then. He had another woman."

That doesn't surprise me. "What other woman?"

"In Richmond. That's where the son of a bitch lived. He just came down here for . . ."

"Came down here for what?"

"You're no babe in the woods. You can guess what he came for. Couldn't get it in Richmond."

"How d'you find out?"

"*She* turned up one day. Fancy type. Polished leather boots half way up her legs. Big bulky sweater and the kind of jeans that cost a fortune. I was holding you when she rang the doorbell."

"What'd she say?"

Mama starts to tear up. "She just looked at you and said, oh my god. Then she told me she was his wife."

"No way! You were his wife."

"He married me, all right, but it didn't count, because he was already married to her."

I put my arm around her shoulders, which are shaking. Mama's smaller than me, a genuine petite. And she's kept herself up. She's a real artist with the cosmetics she sells at Herman's, knows how to emphasize her dark brown eyes, how to use just enough blush to seem natural. I can see how he fell for her.

"I can't believe it," I say. "Why did he marry you if he was already married?"

She blows her nose on a napkin she has in her lap. "I was pregnant with you. I told him we had to get married. He found a preacher, and that was that. I should have suspected. He was gone a lot. But he was high up in the Herman's chain.

That's how I met him. Those stores are all over the south, and I believed him when he said he had to be out of town managing them."

"What did you do?"

"I was a fool," she says.

"I mean, when she turned up."

"Oh, her. I kicked the bitch out of my house. I didn't believe her. But when he came home, he confessed. He'd been married to her for ten years. Ten years! They had two boys. I was all to pieces. I told him I was going to the police. Bigamy's a crime. But he said, what good am I to you in jail? Said he'd buy me this house, put it in my name, which he did. He put $10,000 in a savings account for me. Left me his car."

"And he was gone?"

"Yep. Just like that. I thought he'd keep up with you. He loved you. He really did. But . . . "

"You never heard from him?"

"Not a word."

"Did you try to get in touch? Get some money for me?"

"I had my pride. He broke my heart. I wasn't going to beg."

"So why do you think he wrote me now?" I ask.

"Who knows? Maybe he wants a daughter, now you're grown up so smart. But don't go. I'm warning you. He'll butter you up and let you down."

~

The plane slams down hard and goes racing along the ground and I'm thinking it's going to crash into some building, like a movie I saw. But it jerks to a stop and I get my pocketbook and coat and make my way to the door.

He's out there somewhere and I don't even know what I'm looking for. Except he's tall and has red hair. Like me.

I get out his letter, the second one. *I'll meet you at baggage claim*. No picture.

I keep one eye on the bags moving around a track and the other on the crowd. No tall red heads so far. I grab my bag.

I wait. Ten minutes. I get out my cell phone and try the number he sent me.

You've reached the voicemail of Reynolds James.

I hear Mama's voice: "See? I told you."

A tap on my shoulder.

"Nicky?"

I whirl around to stare into the long, thin face of a man who's bald.

A chauffer, maybe? He'd have one. But do chauffeurs wear faded Navy sweatshirts and jeans?

The man reaches out. His fingers are long, with prominent knuckles. Is he trying to hug me? I step away. He reaches for my bag.

"Nicky," he says again.

"Did Mr. James send you?" I ask.

He laughs. "You could say that."

I'm frightened. "I'm sorry," I say, "but who are you?"

"I'm your dad."

I want to grab my suitcase and run.

He smiles. "I'm sorry," he says. "You had no idea what I look like. My fault." He reaches into his pocket for his wallet and shows me his driver's license. Reynolds James.

But there could be other people with that name.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I was expecting. . ."

"Hair?"

I nod.

"Red, like yours. Lost it early."

"Do you mind?" I take out my IPhone and snap his photo. "My first day in California."

He laughs. "Not at all."

When he turns to go, I quickly text the photo to Mama. She'll know. I follow him to the garage. What choice do I have? He's got my bag. His car is dented, streaked with dirt. A Japanese car, I think.

"Jump in," he says, throwing my suitcase into the clutter on the back seat.

I just stand there beside him in the dimly lit garage. Afraid. I mean he found me on the Internet. He could be anybody.

"I *am* your father, Nicky. I don't know what I can do to prove it."

I'm looking around for help. But the garage is empty.

So while we're standing there he just starts talking. "Poor girl. You're scared. You expected a father with red hair. In a suit and tie, I bet. You expected me to drive a BMW or something. I've got one; I should have brought it."

"I don't believe you," I mutter.

"Let me tell you who I am, Nicky. I *was* the son of a bitch who ran out on your mother sixteen years ago, because I was married to somebody else. But I'm not that man anymore. I've left him behind."

"Who are you?" I ask. We're still just standing there by the dirty car.

"A hiker, as you can see." He points to binoculars on the cluttered back seat. "Don't worry, Nicky. I don't deserve you, but I am your dad."

I don't know why, but I'm wanting to believe him. Maybe because he knows the history. Maybe because I've come so far and I want a father.

My iPhone pings. *He sure got old,* Mama texts, *but that's him.*

I laugh with relief. "Why don't you wash your car?" I ask.

He smiles. "It just gets dirty again. Come on. Get in."

We cross the Golden Gate Bridge, driving over the blue water and all the sailboats and up winding roads into hills covered with brown grass and dusty trees.

At the top of one of the hills, we park outside a wooden gate and walk a cobblestone path through rhododendron and azalea bushes. The wood frame house spreads all over the top of the hill. Inside the rooms all run together, living room, kitchen, dining room. All wood floors and glass. So many windows you hardly need lights.

I didn't know people lived like this.

I look up from unpacking my suitcase and see a deer out the window. I snap a photo and text it to Mama; she has to see this.

Right away she texts back. *Does he live in the woods?*

I find my father in the kitchen. "You must be exhausted," he says, "It's almost midnight back in Virginia."

I gobble up the tuna salad sandwich he's made for me.

"Get some rest," he says in a soft voice. "Thank you for coming."

~

After a restless night, I drag myself to the kitchen in search of coffee. A young woman in a black tank top and a mass of curly blond hair jumps up from the table.

"Hello. I'm Rose."

I shake her hand, pretending not to notice the rose tattooed on the pale skin of her upper arm.

"Welcome," she says, handing me an outsized ceramic mug filled with coffee. "Reynold's been counting the days."

My phone pings. A text from Mama: *R U OK?*

"English muffin?" Rose asks, pulling one apart and dropping the two halves into the toaster. Silver rings with fake stones cover her fingers.

"Thank you."

"You're going to love it here," she says. She's really very pretty. "It's just fantastic."

I'm thinking, what's this woman doing here? Where's my father?

"I don't think I'll be here that long," I say.

"Too bad. He wants to show you around, take you hiking. He's crazy about nature."

"He is?"

"You know. Birds. Flowers."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Don't worry. He'll teach you."

"Is his wife at work?" I ask.

She looks surprised. "What wife?"

"I thought he had a wife named Cynthia."

"Maybe he did, but he doesn't anymore." She grins. "I'm his girlfriend. Since Valentine's Day. He came to the studio for a full massage. And one thing led to another. He's a cool guy, your dad."

I'm thinking, do I really want to get back on an airplane and spend my summer selling shoes at Herman's? Not really. Not at all. And here I am. In California.

"I might give it a week," I say.

~

Hi baby. Thanks a bunch for the photos. Looks like the scumbag is king of the mountain out there in California. What about his wife? Is she being nice to you?

When are you coming home?

~

We're driving along curving roads in the banged up Nissan, past black and white cows clumped together in muddy fields, past hills that roll out to a distance of blue water.

"Why did you come out here?" I ask. I have so many questions. It's easier to ask them riding in a car, not having to face him.

"I was running away from my life." He laughs. "That sounds like a bad soap opera."

"Why?"

"Why? I hated it. Hated driving the freeways from town to town, hiring and firing managers, checking on merchandise, supervising building projects. You have no idea."

I'm suddenly furious. "You left my mother and me for another woman, and then you ran away from her. And now you have somebody else and you didn't even tell me."

He looks surprised. "You mean Rose? God, I'm sorry. I thought I said she was living with me."

"Nope."

"Look, I'm a rat. I said that yesterday. But the fact is, I didn't love my wife. That's how come I got involved with your mother."

"What about your children?"

"My boys were grown when I left. But they hate me all the same." He looks over at me. "Look, it's no excuse, but the fact is I had to marry Cynthia. We were in high school and she wouldn't get an abortion. It was a nightmare from the beginning. But I did love your mother. And you."

"Then why did you . . ."

"Leave you?"

I stare straight ahead and nod.

"I was a coward," he says, "I gave in to my wife, and it was the hardest thing I ever did."

"Sounds like bullshit to me."

"Yep. I guess it does."

"So how come you invited me out here?" I ask.

"I told you. I wanted to get to know you. Besides, I have money. Why not give some of it away? The boys will have nothing to do with me. So I looked you up."

He stops the car. We're parked beside an old barn. Branches of large evergreen trees bend toward the ground.

He jumps out of the car, wiggles his shoulders into a backpack and swings binoculars around his neck.

"Grab a bottle of water. Let's go."

He strides off, squinting into the sun. I follow him along a path high above water. Far down, huge waves are crashing white.

He grins. "*The shattered water made a misty din. / Great waves looked over others coming in.* Robert Frost," he says. "*Once by the Pacific.*"

I've heard of Robert Frost, but I don't know a thing about poetry.

High above us a large bird hangs in the wind. Its wings are stretched out. Not moving.

"Red-tailed hawk," he says, handing me his binoculars. "It's called stilling; he's up there looking for food. They've got amazing vision, those birds."

The hawk is gone before I can focus the glasses, but as I swing them around, two large deer-like animals with gigantic antlers appear.

"What are they?"

"Tule elk. Handsome, aren't they?"

Flowers are everywhere, yellow, red, white. And more elk.

"Are those Redwoods?" I ask, pointing to the large trees overhead.

"Cypress. Redwoods can't survive out here. Wait! Look up. Use the binoculars. Up there in the branches."

"I don't see anything."

"There's a fork in the tree, high up. Can you see it?"

Something *is* up there. Something blurry. Then I see eyes, staring down at me.

"What is it?"

"A great horned owl. It's not every day we see the likes of him. This is your lucky day."

Is it? I breathe in sunshine and chilly air. Suddenly, I feel like I can walk and walk and never get tired.

~

Hi Baby. From the photos it looks like you're out in the woods all the time. Doesn't the man work? You say he's teaching you about birds. That's weird.

And he divorced that Cynthia. What an asshole. Though I'm not sorry for her.

When are you coming home?

~

On the coast overlooking the Pacific. A flash of red, a white rump patch. A high pitched *keew*.

"Flicker," he says, grabbing my arm, pointing. "See him?"

He's landed on a coyote bush in plain sight. His beak is sharp, and points up. He's beautiful.

"How'd you get into birds?" I ask.

"You mean, how did a business type like me discover all this?" He sweeps his arms around.

"I guess."

"Before I was a department store guy, I was a kid. The kind of kid who climbs trees and looks for birds' nests. I got good at recognizing their songs. The department stores were my dad's idea. He owned them and made sure I followed in his footsteps."

"So now you're into nature?"

"What I am is complicated."

That's for sure.

"So how does Rose fit in?" It's a question I've been puzzling over since I arrived.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. She's not interested in birds or hiking or poetry."

"I don't know. She's *un*complicated. Maybe that's it."

"Will you leave her too?"

He stops in his tracks and glares at me. "That's mean and none of your business."

But it is my business. It's exactly my business.

~

It's August. Hard to believe it's only been six weeks. I've climbed Mt. Thomas, peered into tide pools at Big Sur, hiked to the top of Nevada Falls in Yosemite. With this man who whistles bird songs, who reads me poetry.

Who left my mother.

Time to go home.

"One last hurrah," he says. "Top of the mountain."

I'm game. "How many miles?"

"Starting from the house and back, fifteen."

A month ago I would have said no. Too long, too hard. But I'm stronger now. My legs have muscles I never had before.

A sandwich and a bottle of water in my fanny pack, my new binoculars around my neck, a baseball cap on top of my red hair. I'm ready. We start up the hill from the house, climb steps cut into the red dirt, cross bridges, zigzag through coyote brush and lupine, pennyroyal. I know some names of flowers now. We climb over rocks. At the top we unpack sandwiches and look down on whitecaps, on Crystal Lake, on Mt. Juniper miles away. Red-tails and vultures are flying in circles. We're at the top of the world.

"I'll miss you," my father says.

Despite his ridiculous floppy canvas hat, the sun has colored his face bright red. His blue eyes search my face, willing me to say I'll miss him too.

I say instead, "Thank you for having me."

He's looking down at the ocean through his binoculars. "*The clouds are low and hairy in the skies.*"

I take it up. "*Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.*"

"I taught you that poem anyway," he says.

We sit for several minutes.

"Are you glad you came, Nicky?"

"Yes."

"Will you come again?"

"Do you want me to?"

He looks at me. "Of course."

"Why?"

He laughs. "What a question. You're my daughter."

"For the past sixteen years, that didn't count for much."

"I missed you. I wanted to see you, to talk to you, to see what was becoming of you. All those years."

"Well, thanks very much."

"I don't expect you to understand, but Cynthia was so furious when she discovered your mother, I had to promise to put you out of my life."

So much weakness makes me angry.

"So why didn't you see me after you left her?"

"I was afraid."

"That's lame."

"All the same, it's true. Afraid you'd reject me. Hate me. Like the boys."

"You could at least have sent me birthday presents."

"I told you. I'm not a good man. But I'm trying to change. And I wanted to see you. Is that so bad?"

It's too late, I think but don't say.

He looks right in my face. "You're my daughter, Nicky. I don't want to lose you."

I turn away. "You have a history of losing people," I say. "Or more like, discarding people."

He looks suddenly pathetic, hunched there, his red face shining in the sun.

"Nicky," he says, "try for just a minute to imagine that I have changed. That I am capable of change. That I'll be here next summer waiting for you."

I think about Mama and how she would hate it if I ever came back here. How she would make me feel guilty. I think about how much she loves me. So I'm tempted to say, you made your bed. You got me here this summer. That's it. But here I am on top of this mountain, and . . .

"I'm not sure," is what I say.

~

Thank God you're finally coming home. It's been the worst summer of my life. I got T-bone steak for your first night and French fries. I'll be at the airport. I can't wait.

~

We're bumping into each other, frying potatoes, broiling steaks. This kitchen is so small. It's never bothered me before. I've never even noticed the grease stains streaking the walls. And I don't want to notice now. This is home.

Mama's rushing around, setting the table, patting me, kissing me.

"I figure you might not need his money now," she says. "I got a raise."

I say, "I'm proud of you, Mama." I am.

After dinner, I get out my laptop.

"You want to see my pictures?"

"I thought I already did."

"I have a lot more. Yosemite, Big Sur, the Pacific Ocean."

"Okay," she says.

I click on *slide show* and watch my summer flash past. The photographs I've only seen in miniature on my iPhone jump out at me, large as life.

"Who's that?" she asks. It's the first time she's said a word. Rose smiles at the camera, one hand on the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in the other.

"That's Rose. Dad's girlfriend," I say. "I told you about her."

"Looks like he's robbing the cradle."

"You could say that."

She pulls her chair up to the computer and peers into Rose's laughing face. "She looks cheap with all those tattoos. She'll be gone in a year, mark my words."

"I don't know."

"I do," she says.

And I'm thinking young, pretty and, what was his word? *Uncomplicated*. Like Mama all those years ago.

"You may be right," I say and turn off the computer. I can watch the photos another time.

"I'm glad to be home, Mama."

It's what she wants to hear. She grabs me round the waist and holds on to me. The top of her head fits under my chin. I love her.

~

I'm in my bedroom, pulling out shirts, pants, sweaters from the closet, discarding one after the other. I leave for college in a week. None of my clothes seem right.

"Ta dum!" Mama's at the door. She drags a huge suitcase into the tiny room.

"Surprise!" Her smile looks uncertain. "Is it all right?" she asks. "The woman in luggage said all the college kids are buying them. But I wasn't sure."

"It's perfect, Mama. Thank you."

I'm fighting tears. It must have cost so much. And not just money. I wrap myself around her. Feel her rigid shoulders, her thin arms tight around my waist.

"It's for college," she says, pulling herself away. "Not for California. It's much too big for California."

"I know."

"You're not going back there, are you?"

"You mean, ever?"

"I saw the letter," she says, "from your college. He's already paid for all four years. So you don't need to go back."

"I don't know."

"He'll get tired of you, just like he did the rest of us. Just like he will with that Rose."

"Maybe."

She's standing there, a small figure, hanging onto the enormous suitcase she's bought with her raise, pleading with her eyes. I want to reassure her, tell her I'll never fly off to California again, never see him again. And in some ways it makes sense. Chances are good he'll lose interest in me, like he did with all the rest.

But there are mountains out there. And oceans and birds and flowers. There's poetry out there.

And there's my daddy.

About the Author, **Nancy Bourne**: My stories have been published in Upstreet, The South Carolina Review, Summerset Review, Carolina Quarterly, Quiddity, Forge, Persimmon Tree, MacGuffin, Thin Air,

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