

The River Boys

Her dress was dark blue with a wide neckline that scooped over her shoulders, displaying slender collar bones, but no cleavage. It was tight around the smallness of her waist and swished around her knees when she walked into the kitchen. Her hair was cut short and she'd had a permanent that made it perpetually curly and a dye job that turned her natural reddish blonde to a lovely chestnut brown. She'd been dying her hair for so many years that her husband, Reggie, thought it was her natural color. Alice was their third and youngest child. She was perched on Nicole's hip, clinging with tiny fists to her mother's clothing as Nicole walked toward the swinging door that separated the dining room from the kitchen.

This was the same door that had caused an accident involving Reggie's nose the year after they'd moved in. Nicole had been seven months into her second pregnancy and she'd sent Reggie down to the A & P for cigarettes and bread. He told her later that, as he rode his bike, he had smelled the bread the whole way home. He had quit smoking by then. In his attempts to get Nicole to quit as well, he often pointed out the benefit of his renewed sense of smell. Reggie's break with smoking had happened accidentally when he forgot to buy cigarettes to take on a camping trip with friends. In those three days, he said, he had realized that he hadn't smelled a thing in the five years he'd spent smoking. When he returned home from the camping trip, he never smoked again. Nicole couldn't seem to give it up though. She smoked despite her mother's claim that it was bad for the baby, holding firm on her belief that smoking helped her figure return to normal more quickly.

Reggie had returned from the grocery with the requested items and put his bike in the front hallway. He had made to walk into the kitchen, unaware that Nicole was also coming through the door on the other side. She had kicked the door with her foot because she had laundry balanced in both hands and the force of it sent the door smack into Reggie's nose. There was an explosion of blood. Their new next-door neighbor had moved his nose back where it belonged and taped it for him.

Nicole smiled and shook her head at the memory of that day, and pushed the door open very gently. It swung back into the kitchen and then into the dining room again before it settled into a stationary position. She set down the dish she was carrying and put Alice into her highchair, calling to her two older children who were playing in the living room.

She heard the front door open and called out. "Reggie? Baby? Is that you?" She heard him respond, yes, but he didn't say anything else.

Reggie was an overseer for the 18th and 19th production lines at a factory that made and processed building materials--bricks mostly, mortar, and clay. He often came home disgruntled after long days and would tell Nicole about the injuries that had taken place on the lines, what had gone wrong, and what he'd had to spend hours fixing. It was a stressful job, but it brought in enough money for them to live a good life.

"Reggie?" No answer.

Nicole strapped Alice into her chair, making sure that she couldn't fall out, and walked through the dining room to the entry way. Reggie wasn't there so she walked into the back of the house, to their bedroom.

"Reggie?"

She could hear the boys playing in their room and irritation swelled inside her. They had completely ignored her call to dinner. The bathroom door was closed, but they'd been married for eleven years. She pushed the door open.

"Reggie! What happened?"

He was washing his face and the sink was full of pink water. He looked up at her and she could see that his eyebrow was bleeding from a straight, inch-long cut. His nose had blood crusted on the inside of one nostril and the eye below the cut was surrounded by bruises that were darkening by the minute. Nicole grabbed a towel from under the sink, careful to find one of the ones that had already been stained. He wasn't saying anything to her, just looking straight ahead at the un-papered bathroom wall. She crouched down in front of him after he had sat down on the closed toilet seat. She moistened the towel with ice cold tap water and sponged the cut above his eye.

"Reggie, baby, tell me what happened." His eyes fell on hers but he didn't speak right away and he didn't hold her gaze. He looked down at his hands.

"I met the boys at the bar after my shift was over."

At her questioning look he added, "We had a half day today."

It took him a minute to continue, but Nicole didn't press him, just kept wiping his face. "I went outside after finishing my beer and my bike was gone." Nicole smelled vodka, but didn't comment.

"I called out to Frank 'cause he'd been outside for a piss a couple minutes before and I wanted to know if he'd seen anything weird. When he got out there, he said he saw a Negro by the fence where my bike had been." He paused and wiped bloody saliva from the corner of his mouth.

"Frank had his pick-up and we went out looking. It didn't take long for us to find him, he had only gotten a few blocks. Once he saw us coming, and he must have known we were coming for him because of his reaction, he let the bike drop and took off across the street."

Nicole wondered why, if the man had run off, her husband was so bloody. She said as much, but he had stopped speaking, and she had stopped wiping his face. The cuts were drying out and the bruises around his eye looked like they'd become as black as they ever would. After a few more coaxing questions which received no answers, Nicole stood up with a sigh.

"I have to go get dinner for the kids." She could hear the boys in the dining room, probably already digging into the potatoes, and Alice had been crying for ten minutes. "I'll get you a steak for your eye." Reggie nodded his head but didn't look at her.

When she came into the bedroom half an hour later, a cold slab of meat resting in her palm, Reggie was sleeping, lying on his back and fully clothed, on his bed. She placed the steak on his eye and walked back to the other end of the house to get the children to bed.

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Nearly a week passed, and it was Thursday. Nicole had met Lois and her husband Jim when Reggie ran into the door and had needed a doctor. Nicole and Reggie had just moved to Warren from northern Michigan and didn't know the area well enough to find the hospital on their own. Luckily, Lois's husband Jim was experienced in resetting noses from his time spent coaching junior boxing, so they hadn't even had to leave the neighborhood. Lois and Jim lived differently from their neighbors, spending a great deal of

time in Detroit, while also staying involved in the local community activities.

Because of their differing lifestyles, Lois and Nicole hadn't become fast friends. They bumped into each other regularly at the grocery store or in the front yard, and, because of this, a comfortable familiarity had been established. Over the last few months, Lois had begun to drop by randomly during the week, the newspaper always under her arm. To Nicole's surprise, she started to anticipate her friend's arrival.

The morning had been gray, and Nicole had sent the boys out to play despite the rain. They were dressed warmly, and it was good for them to get dirty, even though she knew she'd regret that sentiment as soon as they came back in filthy and wanting dinner. But she knew that childhood only happened once, and they should have their carefree years. She was sitting in the living room folding the wash while Alice slept next to her in her baby chair. She was putting Alice's clean diapers into the basket and was thinking about returning it to the back storage room when a sharp rap sounded on the front door. Nicole lurched out of her chair, desperate to get to the door before the sound was repeated and had fully jarred her napping child from sleep. She reached the door and pushed against it while pulling the handle towards her body--opening it in practiced quiet. It was Lois, and she looked livid. Her hair was growing out and she looked as though she hadn't been taking any pains to tame its natural frizz. She wore minimal make-up, if any, most days, and today was one of the days when she'd left the house without any at all.

"They've found another body! The newspaper doesn't bother connecting them because they're all 'suicides' but this is the third one this year!" She was shrill.

Nicole put her finger to her lips and scowled at her friend. Through gritted teeth she said, "Alice is sleeping!"

She opened the screen door and Lois moved past her, her shoes silent as she walked into the kitchen. Nicole followed and sat across from her friend at the table. Thinking better of just sitting there, she stood up and brought potatoes, celery, carrots, and other vegetables, setting them in front of her chair at the table on a cutting board. She looked in on Alice, still sound asleep, and then returned to the table. Lois had put a newspaper article, already removed from the newspaper itself, onto the table next to the onions and was sitting back in her chair, stiff-lipped, arms and legs crossed. Nicole sighed.

"What happened?" Nicole asked. Lois didn't respond, but raised her eyebrows and inclined her head toward the clipped article as if to say 'read it!' "I'd much rather you just

tell me. You're obviously bursting with it." Nicole said.

Bursting she was. Her words came out in a flurry and she halted only briefly to allow herself a rare break for breath.

As Lois told it, "They did it again." Nicole wasn't sure who she was talking about when she said 'they,' but she had no intention of interrupting her already explosive friend. "They killed him, Nicky! Another one washed up in the Rouge River yesterday morning!"

Nicole tried not to show her alarm. "Who?" She stopped, lowered her voice. "Who did they kill?" Lois looked disappointed at her friend's slow powers of deduction and pointed to the article in front of her. By the time Nicole got to the third sentence, she felt as though she were going to vomit. A young black boy, 14 or 15 years of age the article said, had been found floating in the Detroit river, a bag of bricks tied to his ankles. Lois cut into Nicole's whirling thoughts.

"They're estimating that he died about five days ago." Lois paused. "Even though his body is covered with bruises and he had several wounds over his legs and chest and face, the coroner's report said it was a suicide." Nicole let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "So they're not going to press charges?" She realized she sounded hopeful. Lois looked at her for a moment, then answered. "No, they're not investigating the case."

Lois rubbed her temples and Nicole noticed that all of her friend's nails had been chewed down to stubs. Nicole looked down at her own manicured fingers and felt happy with herself and superior over Lois, not for the first time. Even with three children and a household to care for, Nicole was always impeccably groomed.

Lois was still speaking. "They're letting it go as a suicide." She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and her voice got louder. "Another damn suicide! His name was Michael. He lived with his mother and three sisters. I haven't spoken to the woman myself, but Betsy organized a vigil for the family in their neighborhood in Southfield. She said that they're living in near poverty. The mother is sickly. Without Michael, we don't know how they'll get on. He was his family's main breadwinner."

Nicole shook her head and asked, "If he was from Southfield why was he all the way in Warren? Isn't that a really far walk?" Lois searched Nicole's face. "I never said he was in Warren. They found his body in Rouge River. That's not close to Warren at all."

Nicole was unable to formulate a response to the information put before her. She felt relieved and she felt guilty for feeling relieved. Luckily, Alice woke from her nap and Lois took that as her cue to leave. The boys came in sopping wet and hungry, as predicted, and Nicole forgot what she'd heard for a few hours in the busy, mindless hum of motherhood. Reggie came home from work early. His black eye was hardly noticeable now that the bruising had faded and the cut had all but healed. He wore a smile on his face as he came barging into the house.

"I got a raise!" He picked Nicole up and set her down quickly, pulling a single flower from behind his back. Nicole did her best to smile. "Reggie..." She began, but couldn't muster the courage. She laughed breathily. "Never mind. Dinner's almost ready, I made stew!" He kissed her hard on the lips, so hard that she could taste the blood from the scab healing on his mouth. "Alice!" He took her from Nicole's arms. "Where are the boys?" He walked down the hall to the bathroom where they were showering and Nicole could hear their laughter from the kitchen. She needed to stop worrying and to get on with dinner. Shutting her eyes tightly and reopening them, forcing herself to breathe, Nicole walked into the dining room and set the table.

They all ate dinner together--the boys' heads still wet and smelling strongly of shampoo, Alice letting vegetable mush dribble from her mouth when she giggled at her brothers. That night, Nicole celebrated Reggie's promotion with him. She let him touch her and please himself. Then, claiming a headache, she moved back to her own bed across the room.

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That next Saturday, Lois came to retrieve her friend. They took their babies and drove forty minutes to Michael's neighborhood in Southfield, following Betsy, who knew the way. There was a small church, absolutely filled with people. Lois and Nicole were two of five white women present, most of whom had helped put the event together. Nicole felt awkward and as though everyone was staring at her. The inside of the building was dimly lit, mostly by candles that stood precariously on chairs, on the make-shift altar at the front of the building, and on the floor. There was only one window.

Lois bounced her youngest son on her hip and leaned in to whisper in Nicole's ear, "This used to be a storage house for grain." She paused and smiled. "I'm glad you came." Oddly, her friend's smile didn't seem at all out of place, even though many people were wailing

around them. The requiem was vocal and almost everyone in the small crowd spoke about Michael, and how he'd helped his momma since she'd brought their family north. Nicole was taken in by the service and how loud it was, so different from her father's funeral, which had been staid and ceremonious. When the singing had stopped and the casket had been carried out, Michael's mother stood at the door to the building greeting and thanking everyone who'd come. Nicole reached her and their eyes met. The woman bowed her graying head to her, out of deference or thanks, Nicole wasn't sure. She patted Nicole's hand and introduced herself as Nelly. Nicole didn't cry with her when the tears began to flow again, though she had felt sadness at the death.

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After returning home, she took Alice and put her down for her nap. Reggie was still out with the boys fishing, and didn't know that she'd been gone at all. She changed out of her black dress and settled into her chair in the front room to repair Reggie's socks. A few hours later, the front screen opened and Reggie wheeled his bike through the doorway and leaned it against the hallway wall. He smiled at his wife and walked over, bending to kiss her. He started to tell her about his day while taking rods and tackle from the strap he'd secured behind his seat. Since he'd come in, Nicole had been trying very hard to take her eyes from the bicycle.

She interrupted him, "Reggie..." she paused, looked at his smiling, almost fully healed face. He looked expectant, almost worried. She cleared her throat and suppressed an image of Michael's mother, crying over a crude, handmade cross. When she didn't speak, he lifted a small rectangular brown package and held it out to her. It fit easily into her hands and wasn't more than a pound in weight.

"I almost forgot! This was on the porch, it says it's from Lois."

Nicole's mouth smiled, but the rest of her face refused to follow its lead. She took the parcel and brushed Reggie's shoulder with her hand. "I'll just be in the kitchen." Her words were weak and quiet. She turned and walked through the dining room and pushed the swinging door. She took a knife from the drawer next to the sink and slit the brown paper wrapping, feeling both excitement and foreboding. Inside were two books and a note. The note read,

"Nicky, it was great of you to come this morning. I haven't been able to get many people to care about the awful things that are happening around us, but I think you really do, or

you could. Here are some books, if you're interested. They helped me see things more clearly. My women's group is having a meeting this Saturday in Detroit. If you could come, that'd be great. I'll have our car and I can pick you up. -Lois"

Nicole looked at the books for a moment, but couldn't focus on their titles. What had become of all of those boys? All of the suicides? And where were her own boys who'd left that morning with their father? She rushed through the door to the dining room and saw Reggie walking, his back turned to her, down the hallway toward the back of the house.

"Reggie!"

He turned, a half-smile on his face, like she'd interrupted a pleasant memory from the day. His face was more handsome than it had been when they'd gotten married. He could grow a full beard now, and his jaw had broadened just as his shoulders had.

"Babe?" His face took on a worried edge as he looked her over. She realized she'd brought the knife with her from the kitchen. It rested like a weight in her hand, pulling her toward the ground.

Nicole paused and set the knife on the table, then thought better of leaving it there with so many little hands in the house and picked it back up. So many questions were fighting inside her chest. She pushed her hair behind her ears--something she'd done since childhood when she was feeling nervous.

She smiled and forced herself to form words. "Where are the boys?"