

Simone Poirier-Bures

One Last Time

Nicole struggles the wheels of the stroller up over the curb, careful not to jolt the little blue mummy perched in the seat nor the two bags of groceries tucked in the basket behind him. Her satchel, holding an extra blanket, bottle, and diaper, lurches from the push bar where she has hung it and bangs against her knees.

She stops for a moment to catch her breath. All together she had to be pushing 50 pounds. If only she weren't so tired. If only she could have an uninterrupted night's sleep for a change. She stares at the small blue back. What could be the matter with him that he would wake two or *three* times every night? Four months old was too young to be teething.

Perhaps he was still not used to their new surroundings. But then, she wasn't used to them yet either. She glances at the leafless trees, their naked, vulnerable limbs. If it hadn't gotten so cold so soon, maybe things wouldn't seem so bleak. Back in Nova Scotia or on Long Island, they could count on a decent Indian Summer. The temperatures in early November would still be moderate, leaves still burning red and orange against the sky. But here, in this Southern Ontario town, the leaves all lie in untidy piles along the curbs. Already winter has descended upon the town like a weight, the earth hardened like a fist.

A woman approaches her going the other way. Nicole forms her face into a greeting, but the woman walks on, hugging her coat collar, without even looking at her. On the opposite side of the street other people hurry by; white plumes of breath float out of their mouths. She thinks of the woman she met in the produce section of the store a little while ago. The woman, smiling, had said, "Your baby is adorable!" She had dark curly hair and wore a red coat the same shade as her lipstick. Nicole had warmed, ready to to become her best friend, to

love her forever. But the woman had moved on to the meat department before this could happen.

Nicole parks the stroller outside and carries the baby and his bag of things up the four steep steps to the side door. She takes off his snowsuit and lays him down in the playpen. Then she carries in the two bags of groceries and puts them on the counter while she takes off her own heavy coat, hat, scarf and boots. So much effort to do the simplest things! Barely noon, and already she is exhausted.

The baby is making noises; it is time to feed him. She prepares a bottle, noting the dirty ones soaking in the sink. She should get today's laundry started, too. Every day it is the same. Hours and hours of changing and holding and feeding and getting things ready. This child has taken over her life; there is nothing left.

After he finishes his bottle, she collapses with him on the sofa for a few minutes. He perches on her chest, trying to do pushups. His mouth opens in a gummy smile.

"Don't you think seven-thirty would be a much nicer time to get up in the morning than six?" she asks him, yawning. A blob of saliva oozes down from his mouth onto her neck. He chortles, as if she has told him a wonderful joke.

They hadn't planned on having a baby just yet, but had accepted the news cheerfully: they would change their plans a little, that was all. And the pregnancy had been lovely, months of afternoon naps with the cat curled below her huge stomach, the tranquil dreams spun around the coming of this child. . . . Who would have thought it would be so much work? That it would take so much time? That everything else would change, too? Her sister, Annette, hadn't warned her. Annette with her three little ones. How on earth did she manage with three? If only Annette were around to show her how to do it. Or her mother, who had somehow, miraculously it seemed now, survived having four.

Her mother had come for a few days after the birth. Her mother, in a new burgundy suit with matching shoes, the grey in her hair craftily hidden. She had seemed younger than the last time Nicole had seen her, as if the process of aging had been reversed and she were now spiralling down toward youth.

"Paul is a good Acadian name," she had said, cooing over the baby. "He looks like the LeBlancs, too. Make sure you let him know that he's half Acadian and talk to him in French."

Her mother taught solely in French now. Trudeau had introduced mandatory bilingualism; her mother's school in Dartmouth offered

total immersion French classes, and her mother was helping to design the curriculum.

While she, Nicole, was involved in total immersion motherhood. She had quit her accounting job toward the end of her pregnancy, thinking she would start an accounting service after they moved, after things got settled. But everything had seemed easier, possible, before the baby, or “BB” as she has begun to refer to that time. Six weeks in this new town, this new house, and she has not found the energy even to settle in. Unopened boxes lurk in the corners of the house; uncurtained windows stare reproachfully.

“How come you look only a little sleepy when I am completely exhausted?” The 14-pound bundle wiggles on her chest. His eyelids have begun to droop, but he rouses himself and reaches for her nose.

“It’s beddi-bye time now,” she says getting up. Thank God.

Every afternoon, the baby sleeps. At least he is consistent in that. She thinks of the two or three hours that lie ahead as a gift. A blessing. She arranges the blanket over his little back, over his raised, padded bottom. She could sleep now, too. She aches to fall into her own bed, but she is afraid. Sometimes when she naps in the afternoon something strange happens. Her mind or spirit—she is not sure what to call it, this thing that holds consciousness—slips out of her body like a swimmer shedding her clothes by the side of a stream. It hovers in the air detached, but close to the body, as if, like the swimmer, it dares not swim too far from the shelter of the clothing resting on the bank. It should be a pleasant feeling, she thinks, that sudden unencumbered state. But there are noises: the windows rattle like bones, the cupboards in the kitchen creak like foot steps, the furnace bleats and moans like anger. The spirit, eyeless, naked, twitches nervously, like a candle flame. *Listen*, it tells the body. Do you hear that? But the body, sluggish and stubborn, sleeps on. Fear mounts, shrill and constant like a high-pitched siren. *You must wake up! Something terrible will happen!* Finally, mind and body snap together and she jolts awake trembling, her hair damp against her neck.

Only these last six weeks, only since the move, has this strange thing happened. She has not told Michael. It is too . . . what? She doesn’t want to worry him.

No, she won’t try to sleep. Perhaps she will prepare a nice meal for tonight—a hearty stew to surprise Michael. They used to have such lovely intimate dinners, BB. Or perhaps she will write a long letter to her mother, or unpack a few more boxes, or start putting up the hems of her winter skirts.

But her limbs feel thick and numb, and refuse to move. She sits on the brown naugahide easy chair and looks out the living room window. A mood is settling upon her, entering her like a vapor. It is the mood of another day, another time—five distant years ago.

Her mother had summoned her from her summer waitressing job on Long Island. “Come right away,” she had said, “if you want to see your father alive one last time.” When Nicole arrived, what she found on the hospital bed was not the father she remembered, but a shrunken facsimile.

“Mr. LeBlanc, your daughter has come to see you,” the nurse barked into a grey ear. “Your daughter from the States. She’s come all this way.”

Pale green tubes coiled into his arms and slithered into his nose like snakes. His mouth, without the plastic teeth, had collapsed inward and fell partly open.

“Mr. LeBlanc,” the nurse urged again. “This is the daughter you’ve been asking after.” The nurse was stout, with broad hips and a pink, Scottish face. “Can you open your eyes and say hello?”

It had all happened so quickly. Four months before, when Nicole had come home at Easter, he had been his usual self, his heavy body moulding to the old easy chair with the broken springs, a pile of theology books on the floor beside him, growling at everyone, and stinking in those long johns he changed once a week. In June he had gone for tests. “The usual complaints,” her mother had written; “You know your father.” Then suddenly, he had begun leaving—sixty pounds of him had disappeared in two and a half months. All that remained was this thin, silent, grey body she barely recognized.

Later that afternoon, Nicole visited the basement. She had found no reason to go down there during her brief visits home the previous two years, and the basement was not an especially pleasant place to seek out. But the basement had once been her father’s turf, and now that he was dying, she felt drawn there. Half way down the stairs, she was met by the familiar smell of dampness and decay. It was worse than ever. There was junk everywhere—broken furniture, scraps of linoleum, empty jars and bags, outgrown and worn out clothing, parts from old cars that André and Claude had salvaged. Three overflowing garbage cans stood near the large wooden doors where her father used to drive in the truck.

Her father’s old desk stood in its usual corner under the front window. Scattered papers and half-opened drawers gave it an inter-

rupted look, as though someone working there had suddenly been called away and never allowed back. Now everything was covered with dust.

But her father had not been suddenly called away. He had simply stopped. She remembered how he had tried to sell the candy business. How no one wanted it. André and Claude eventually ate what was left of the inventory.

Why had he never come down to put his affairs in order? Perhaps he could not bear to see the desolation, Nicole thought, staring at the broken, gaping drawer.

Once, she had been his helper, unpacking cartons, arranging the candy shelves, these very shelves that were now filled with junk. How important she had felt in the old truck, how indispensable, riding with her father, the Candyman, from store to store, carrying in boxes. It seemed so long since they had been friends. Those last years he had disapproved of everything about her—her clothes, her jobs, her going away to school. They had exchanged so many ugly words. And yet, he had asked for her; the nurse had said so. He had wanted to see her.

She dusted off a few papers. An old bill for 25 cartons of potato chips. A receipt for a return shipment of conversation hearts. Was this all that was left of his life? She explored a drawer. There seemed to be no order, everything was muddled, confused. In the back of the middle drawer she found pencil stubs, an old pen, a dried up bottle of blue-black ink. Then, a rumpled carbon copy of a letter to the Department of Fisheries requesting a job. It was written in July 1947—she would have been two and a half then, she calculated—and in it her father listed all the things he had done. He had been an interpreter, a manager; he had helped start cooperatives among farmers, fisher men; he had a Bachelor's degree from Tufts University in Boston; before the Great Depression he had worked as an engineer.

All her life she had thought of him only as the Candyman, then as the old man who made her life and her mother's life miserable. She remembered the creditors who had hounded her mother because of his bills, threatening first to take the house and then to take the furniture, while her father sat in his chair with a newspaper, saying he had done his best and the creditors could all go to hell. Yet he had done so many interesting things. Things she hadn't known about. The semester before she had learned about the cooperative movement in her sociology class; why hadn't anyone told her he'd been a part of all that?

Stunned by the magnitude of her discovery, she had dug into the other drawers, looking for more. She sifted through the filmy carbons,

as thin and fragile as onion skins—bills, invoices, letters to attorneys and insurance companies. She was struck by the terrible struggle of it all, the crushing details of lost orders, minor accidents, robberies. She had been there, she had lived through it, yet it seemed different now, viewed through these pieces of paper—so many complications, so many impediments to success. Finally, she found what she had begun looking for without realizing: a personal letter addressed to her mother in her father's handwriting. Full of guilty curiosity, she took the letter from the envelope and read.

"Ma Petite Mignonne," it began. She had to read each sentence several times, as she was not used to reading handwritten French. He had gone to Halifax to attend some kind of meeting, she gathered, for he reported that it was going well. Evidently it was spring, for he talked about the flowering trees in the Public Gardens and how he wished she could see them. It made his heart ache, he said, to see those trees without her. After they were married and moved to Halifax, they would go there for long walks. The letter was three pages long. Hope, joy, and love leaped from her father's angular, gently sloping hand.

Nicole stared at the letter, trying to recall the early days when she was a child. But the pictures she remembered most clearly were the recent ones: her father alone in his chair, the invisible wall that surrounded him, the disappointment, the anger, the failure. And yet, somewhere, behind all that, there had once been this. He had noticed things. He had felt things. He had had a life before them. And she had thrown him away, like a shabby old box, not knowing what was hidden inside. All those ugly things she had said to him, the times she had wished him dead!

The next day during visiting hours, Nicole held the limp packet of connected bones that was her father's hand.

"Dad, it's me, Nicole," she urged. "Please come back! I need to ask you something. I need to tell you something."

Between visiting hours she sat at the cluttered desk in the basement and wept.

For six days she sat at her father's bedside holding his hand, trying to call him back from wherever he was. Once his hand tightened on hers. Dad, do you know it's me? And for a moment she was sure he did.

When it was time to return to her college in the States she thought: it might have been only a spasm, the muscles involuntarily tensing.

In mid-November a call came to her dorm room in the middle of the night, and Nicole returned to Halifax. They rode in a long black car, she and her mother and André and Claude. Annette and Emile fol-

lowed in another car, part of a long line of cars that followed them like a feast day processional. It all seemed so unreal, with those thin flurries of snow, as fine and dry as ashes, floating against the windows. Along the Bedford Highway, a group of workmen digging by the side of the road paused by their picks and shovels and took off their hats. Seeing them, their bare heads slightly bowed, their faces red and weather beaten, their woollen hats crushed against their chests—something numb inside her moved, flopped like a fish on the bottom of a boat. Beyond, the Bedford Basin shimmered pale and silent like the sky.

Later, they stood around a gaping hole while Father Casey spoke of resurrections, reunions. His red hair gleamed ferociously, obscenely, against the grey of the day, the drabness of their clothing, the dark pile of displaced earth. A birthmark on the side of his jaw, the shape and color of a small clam shell, moved as his mouth moved, oddly, hypnotically.

Her mother stood very still, her face a mask. André stared at the hole; Claude's left foot twitched. Annette, pale and pregnant, leaned on Emile's arm, her big belly protruding from her open coat. Across from them stood Tante Mathilde with her daughter Muriel, their faces sullen and reproachful, as if her father's death had been a personal affront.

The others—who were they? She recognized Sam Dugas, his forlorn, rumpled face like that of a faithful dog, but the rest? Old business friends? Customers? It surprised her that her father knew so many people, that so many people cared about him.

It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered except that hole, that deep, rectangular mouth into which he would go. It was neat and precise, the corners carefully squared as if it had been cut from the earth with a giant cookie cutter. She wondered, suddenly, about the men who had dug it. Had they sat on the rim half way through, drinking hot coffee, admiring their work?

Afterward, on their way back to the car, her mother took her arm. "Your father and I did love each other," she said emphatically, almost defiantly. "Things just happen." Her mother's nose was pink from rubbing.

But it didn't matter any more. They had lowered him into that perfect hole and it was over.

All but the unknowing. The unknowing that had gnawed at her for months, that seized her at unexpected moments, like sickness on a tossing boat. Had he felt her presence in the hospital room? Had he

heard her silently begging his forgiveness? Had he cared that she had come back?

In the five years since then, the mood of that day has settled itself on other days, as a cloud of smoke will drift anonymously from one town to the next, no longer associated with its origin.

Nicole sits in her chair, staring at the grey sky, thinking only of her throbbing tiredness. Perhaps she will lie down after all. Surely she is tired enough to sleep soundly. Her limbs feel so heavy . . .

And lovely and inviting are the flannel sheets, the down comforter. Her face sinks into the pillow; everything smooths out, the release warm and liquid. Time passes.

But wait. Suddenly the mind snaps loose like a light flashing on in a dark room. There's a noise in the hall.

Don't be silly. It's only the wind, the cold, the house creaking.

There is someone here. Someone is coming down the hall.

You are imagining things.

Wake up. I need your eyes!

The body, heavy as earth, refuses to stir.

I know that shuffle, those slow, heavy steps. I know that rasping breath like the roar of the sea. Has he come to chastise me? Arms and legs, eyes, you must wake up!

He stops at the bedroom doorway. She feels him watch her sleeping body. Taut with fear, she waits for his judgment. Years pass. Her soul quivers, suspended. Finally, he moves on.

Almost immediately, she jerks awake, blood pounding in her ears. Was it really him? She searches the empty hall on trembling legs for a sign, something physical. Surely it was a dream. It had to have been a dream. But what did it mean when the dead came like that? Suddenly, a clap of terror, sharp as lightning. The baby. Something has happened to the baby! She rushes wildly to the bedroom.

But she finds him sleeping peacefully, his fingers folded together like nesting birds. Only the drumming of her heart fills the room, so loud it will surely wake him.

She studies the little chest rising and falling, the eyes fluttering in dreams, and is astounded by the intensity of her fear. Astounding, too, is this surge of ferocious love she feels—for this little creature who troubles her nights, who occupies all her days, from whose life her own has become barely distinguishable. *This is what it means to have a child. What joins us is beyond words, beyond will or reason. This is what it means.* And in this moment, full of this knowing, she thinks of

her father, now, after all those years of love and hate and grief, drawn to her doorway, just to watch her sleep.