

Coming Back to Nick
by: Marianne Lonsdale

My mother, and even my husband, worried I might be too rough with a baby. I tended to be impatient, rushing through any activity with a lack of grace. But that changed when I gave birth to my only son, Nick, when I was forty-one, after three miscarriages and years of trying. I understood that changing his diapers, breastfeeding in the dark middle hours of night, and childproofing the house were how he'd learn he was loved and safe. I was tender. I listened to every cry, every babble and hung on every word my beautiful son said.

He loved being carried in a front pack, facing me, while we walked and shopped. When he was strong enough to hold up his head, I'd put the pack on my back because I'd noticed many babies preferred looking out, looking around. Not Nick. He'd fuss until I placed him in the front, where he could stare up at my face.

He thrived on activity and being with other kids, but only if I was nearby. That didn't stop even once when he started school. He'd cling to my leg if I tried to leave him at a birthday party or gymnastics class. I learned it was better, easier, for my husband to do any drop-offs.

Nick and I went to Disneyland for spring break when he was in fifth grade. "It's A Small World" is a version of hell for my husband, so he stayed home. Nick had grown his hair long and his brown locks skimmed his shoulders. On the shuttle from Disneyland to our hotel, a young girl, maybe five years old, asked me "Is he your daughter?" Confusion flooded Nick's face.

"Does my hair make me a girl?" he whispered.

I shook my head and pulled my arm tight around his shoulder.

He wanted a haircut the following week. He visited with his girl cousins that weekend and one of them braided corn rows tight against his head. He loved them and proudly wore them to school for two days before his haircut. There are three pictures of him from that week—one with long hair, one with corn rows and one with short hair—and he’s beaming joy in all three. My confident, quirky, beautiful son.

Nick and I are walking down College Avenue, trying to decide on a restaurant for dinner. I’m bundled up in a long wool coat and he’s shivering in a t-shirt and shorts. I’m annoyed at my thirteen-year-old son for so many things on this cold November evening, one being that he never remembers a jacket.

He pauses at the entrance to Cactus Taqueria, a usual favorite for both of us.

“Hey Mom, how about tacos?” he nearly shouts as I keep going.

I don’t answer. I’m frustrated with him for rejecting Oakland Tech, the high school I want him to go to. We’d toured the school before dinner. I’d been exhilarated by the diversity of the student body, the well-thought out and proven approach to academics, the commitment of the teachers. Nick told me there was no way he’d be going there. He wouldn’t know anybody. That was it, no other reason. Oakland Tech is a well-regarded public school with no tuition, and we could no longer afford private school. Nick’s still nervous about doing anything, going anywhere by himself. What he doesn’t understand is he doesn’t have a choice.

He runs a few steps to catch up with me. I hear his feet, but don’t look behind me.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “Chinese? I could go for pot stickers.”

I stop and pull my wallet from my purse. “Let’s just eat separate. I’ll give you ten dollars and meet you at the car in a half hour,” I growl. “Get whatever you want. We don’t want the same things.”

“Oh Mom,” Nick’s voice cracks. “Don’t be like that, please don’t be like that.” My lean, handsome dark-haired son has shot up to a few inches taller than me in the past year, but right now he sounds so small, so needy.

I rarely get mad at Nick and he can’t stand it when I do. My heart softens a bit at the pain in his voice. I relent and we walk back to Cactus, order our favorites and eat in silence. Nick brings the pico de gallo that I like from the salsa bar, and the hot habanero for himself.

On the drive home, he mentions he needs to stop at Rite Aid for supplies for a school project due tomorrow. I’m already tired and frustrated, and snap at him that he should have started the project sooner. I like my own behavior tonight even less than I like Nick’s.

“You’re going to Oakland Tech,” I explain while on the drive home. “I’m mad that you won’t even consider it.” His dad and I have been telling him this for two years. We’d begun to regret our decision to send him to private school, especially now that it was clear how hard it would be hard for him to transition from a class of thirty-eight kids to a high school of over two thousand. But several friends of ours had kids who were thriving at Oakland Tech.

Nick doesn’t respond to me.

I pull the car up right in front of Rite Aid. I hand Nick a twenty-dollar bill and tell him I’ll wait in the car. He just sits there. Can’t he even pick up a few school supplies without me? Maybe I’ve babied my late-in-life only child too much.

Nick bursts into tears. He’s not a crier and he’s sobbing.

“We’ll get through this Nick,” I assure him. “You know how much other kids like you. Teachers like you. I think you’ll do great at Tech.”

“It’s not that Mom. I feel scared all the time. I’m sad all the time. I don’t know what to do. Can you help me?”

I believe him and my heart lurches. His voice has a desperation I’ve not heard before. I take his hand and he grips mine.

“Sweetie, how long have you been feeling this way?”

“A long time. That’s what scares me. Since seventh grade.”

It’s November of eighth grade. It’s been at least five months. Middle school has been hard. He doesn’t seem to want to do anything with his guy friends and they don’t invite him anywhere anymore. Everyone, including me, thinks Nick is gay, but we’re not talking about that yet. All his friends are girls.

“Are you more upset tonight because I’ve been mad at you?” I probe.

“I’m always upset. I just don’t tell you.”

My gut tells me something is really wrong. My breathing slows and pulls deep into my belly until I realize I’ve stopped breathing, and I let the air release.

“Do you know what would make you happy?” I ask. “What would make you feel better?”

“That’s what scares me the most,” he says. He stops and cries for a few seconds. He turns his head away from me, looking out the car window. “I don’t know what would make me happy. I’m afraid I’m always going to be like this.” His voice is shaky and low.

I reach across and hug him. I tell him I will figure out how to help him. I ask if he wants to see a therapist. He says yes and together we go into the store and buy what he needs. I'm lightheaded. I usually know what my beautiful boy needs—I have answers for him almost before he's asked a question—like I can see his needs coming. He and I used to be so in sync.

I feel we've entered a maze after that, where we take a correct turn, find center, and then everything is good again. For a while. Concerned about Nick's anxieties, we tighten our budget so he can attend the private high school that most of his middle school classmates go to, but he's joined at the hip with a teenage girl who's even shyer than him. Whenever we hit wrong turns in the maze, we have to back up. When I find Nick's self-medicating with pills and vodka, I feel I've slammed into wall after wall in the maze that takes all my strength to climb over. We're not a tough-love family and I wonder if we should be.

When he comes out in junior year and has a boyfriend, we think this may be a turning point. And maybe it is for a while. The second half of high school goes pretty smooth and he's accepted at one of his top college choices, a university in Chicago. I'm stunned that he wants to move. By himself.

In college, Nick does well at times, and sometimes he doesn't. He takes a quarter off when his anxieties skyrocket. His dormmate sells drugs and drops out of school. I feel like I'm still on high alert all the time. When he finally moves to an apartment by himself, he seems more settled until he drops out of college a few months before graduation and I'm back on shaky ground with him.

I hang on to a few facts: he's in therapy, he's not drinking, and he has a strong work ethic. Since age sixteen, he's worked various jobs—barista, running an empanadas shop, handing out promotional flyers. He likes to work, shows up on time, is a model employee. It's been seven years since he broke down in tears in my car and I'm finally letting it sink all the way in that my smart, beautiful, capable son has ongoing mental health challenges. Anxiety does not always have a permanent fix.

Eventually he returns to college, even lobbying and getting approval to have his partial scholarship reinstated. We're still in the maze, but I'm not as desperate to find the correct path. Now I understand that we both need to keep moving. Sometimes we're on the same route and sometimes we're unable to reach each other, but still we keep trying to reach center and each other.