

The Years of My Birth

By Louise Erdrich

The nurse had wrapped my brother in a blue flannel blanket and was just about to hand him to his mother when she whispered, “Oh, God, there’s another one,” and out I slid, half dead. I then proceeded to die in earnest, going from slightly pink to a dull gray-blue, at which point the nurse tried to scoop me into a bed warmed by lights. She was stopped by the doctor, who pointed out my head and legs. Stepping between me and the mother, the doctor addressed her.

“Mrs. Lasher, I have something important to say. Your other child has a congenital deformity and may die. Shall we use extraordinary means to salvage it?”

She looked at the doctor with utter incomprehension at first, then cried, “No!”

While the doctor’s back was turned, the nurse cleared my mouth with her finger, shook me upside down, and swaddled me tightly in another blanket, pink. I took a blazing breath.

“Nurse,” the doctor said.

“Too late,” she answered.

I was left in the nursery with a bottle strapped to my face while the county tried to decide what to do with me. I was too young to be admitted to any state-run institution, and Mr. and Mrs. George Lasher refused to have me in their house, which was at the edge of a nearby town, where Mr. Lasher owned and ran a farm-implements dealership.

The night janitor at the hospital, a woman from the reservation named Betty Wishkob, asked the head maternity nurse for permission to hold me on her break. While cradling me, with her back to the observation window, Betty also nursed me—she was still nursing her youngest child at home. As she fed me, she molded and rounded my skull with her powerful hand. Nobody in the hospital knew that she was feeding me at night, or that she was doctoring me and had made up her mind to keep me. This was five decades ago. When Betty asked if she could take me home, there was relief and not a lot of paperwork involved, at least in the beginning. So I was saved, and grew up with the Wishkobs. I lived on the reservation and eventually was educated as my Chippewa siblings were—first at a school run by the Catholic mission and later at one run by the government.

Around the age of two, I was taken away for the first time and placed alone in a room. I remember the smell of disinfectant and what I would now call despair. Into this disinfected despair, there came a presence, someone or something, who grieved with me and held my hand. That presence would come to me again at other moments in my life. Its return is partly what this story is about.

The second time that an officious welfare officer decided to find a more suitable home for me, I was four. As Betty argued with her in the dust of our yard, the matted hackles on the dog's back rose. I stood beside Betty and held her skirt—green cotton. I pressed the fine weave between my fingers and hid my face in its scent of heated cloth. Then I was in the back seat of a car that sped soundlessly in some infinite direction. I slept. I woke alone in another white room. My bed was narrow, and the sheets were tucked tightly down, so that I had to struggle to get out. I sat on the edge of the bed for what seemed like a long time, waiting.

When you are little, you do not always know when you are screaming or crying—your feelings and the sound that comes out of you are all one thing. I remember that I opened my mouth, that is all, and that I did not shut it until I was back with Betty.

Every morning until I was about eleven, Betty and her husband, Albert, tried to straighten me by stretching out my legs. They woke me before the other children and brought me into the kitchen. I drank a glass of thin, blue milk by the woodstove. Then Betty sat in a kitchen chair and put me in her lap. Albert sat across from us in another chair.

“Put your feet out, Tuffy,” he said.

I put my feet in Albert's hands, and he pulled me one way while Betty pulled the other. Slowly, as I grew, my legs untwisted, though one was always a little shorter than the other. I was the youngest of their four children—it was Sheryl whom Betty had been nursing when she cared for me in the hospital. Their older son, Cedric, gave me the name Tuffy because he knew that once I went to school I would get a nickname anyway. He didn't want it to be one that mocked my rolling walk or my head. My head—so misshapen when I was born that the doctor had diagnosed a birth defect—was still a bit flat on one side, where I had been crushed in the womb by my twin. But it had been shaped enough by Betty's squeezing and kneading that by the time I was old enough to look in a mirror I thought I was pretty.

Neither Betty nor Albert ever told me I was wrong; it was Sheryl who gave me the news.

“Tuffy, you are so ugly you’re cute,” she said.

I looked in the mirror the next chance I got and realized that she was telling the truth.

The house we lived in had a smell that permeates it still—old wood, onions, fried coot, the salty outdoors scent of children. Betty was always trying to keep us clean, and Albert was always getting us dirty. He took us into the woods and showed us how to spot a rabbit run and set a snare. We yanked gophers from their holes with loops of string and picked pail after pail of berries. We rode a mean little bucking pony, fished perch from a nearby lake, dug potatoes every year to make money for school clothes. Betty’s job at the hospital had not lasted. Albert sold firewood, corn, squash. We never went hungry. Not long ago, I read a memoir by a man named Peter Razor, who was abandoned like me, only he ended up in an institution. He wrote of the one time that he remembered being held, and said that it remained one of the strangest and happiest moments of his life. I don’t remember being held as something special. Which tells me that I must have been held so often that the sensation became a part of me, inseparable from my memory of the world.

I know that I was loved, because it was a complicated matter for Betty and Albert to claim me from the welfare system, though I

had aided their efforts with my endless scream. A full adoption involved hiring a lawyer, which they didn’t have the money to do. I was afflicted with nightmares of being chased down and captured, and many nights I scrambled into the warm cleft of mattress between them, then held my breath and lay perfectly still until they had rolled over and gone back to sleep. When I knew that I was safe, I opened my eyes and looked into the darkness, which was never entirely black but alive with shifting green panels and tiny zigzags of fractured light. Then I’d feel myself sliding down into a safe, warm sleep, their slow and even breathing like a gentle rope, keeping me from slipping too far.

All of which is not to say that they were perfect. Albert drank from time to time and passed out on the floor. Betty’s temper was explosive. She never hit, but she yelled and raved. She could say awful things. Once, Sheryl was twirling around in the house. There was a shelf set snugly in the corner of the living room, and on that shelf there was a cut-glass vase that was very precious to Betty. When we brought her wildflower bouquets, she’d put them in that vase. I’d seen her washing the vase with soap and polishing it with an old pillowcase. Sheryl’s arm knocked the vase off the shelf, and it struck the floor with a bright sound and shattered into splinters.

Betty was working at the stove. She spun around, threw her hands out, and stared.

"Damn you, Sheryl," she said. "That was the only beautiful thing I ever had."

"Tuffy broke it!" Sheryl said, and bolted out the door.

I stood mute and too frozen to speak. Betty began to cry, harshly, wiping her face with her forearm. I moved to sweep up the pieces for her, but she said to leave them, in such a heartsick voice that I went to find Sheryl, who was hiding in her usual place on the far side of the henhouse. When I asked her why she'd blamed me, she gave me a glaring, hateful look and said, "Because you're white."

Children can be brutal when it comes to gaining the attention and favor of their parents. I didn't hold anything Sheryl did or said against her, and we became close later on. I am very glad for that, as I have never married, and I needed to confide in someone when, six months ago, I was contacted by my birth mother.

Until Betty and Albert died, I lived in an addition tacked onto the tiny house where all of us grew up. They died one right after the other, in the space of a few months, as the long-married

sometimes do. By then, the other children had either moved off reservation or built new houses closer to town. I stayed on. Even now that Betty and Albert were gone and I had the whole house, I spent most of my time in my room. One difference was that I let the dog, a descendant of the one that had growled at the welfare lady, live inside with me. Betty had believed in outside dogs, but I petted and pampered this one. I'd had a fireplace installed, with a glass front and fans that threw the heat into a cozy circle in front of it, and there I'd sit every evening, with the dog at my feet, reading or crocheting while I listened to music.

Then one night the telephone rang.

I answered it with a simple hello. There was a pause. A woman asked if this was Linda Wishkob speaking.

"It is," I said, and then I experienced a skip of apprehension.

"This is Nancy Lasher." The voice was tight and nervous. "I am your mother."

I took a breath, let it out. I said nothing but simply set the phone back in the cradle. Later, that moment struck me as funny. It was a kind of replay of my birth. I'd done it over. But this time I had instinctively rejected my mother, left her in the cradle just as she'd left me.

I work in the reservation post office. I am a government employee. At any time, I could have found out my birth parents' address. I could have called them up or, had I been another sort of person, got drunk and stood in their yard and railed at them. But not only did I not care—I actively did not want to know where they lived. Why would I? Everything I did know about them was painful, and I have always tried to avoid pain—which is perhaps why I've never married or had children.

That night, after I'd hung up the phone, I made a cup of tea and busied myself with crossword puzzles. One stumped me. The clue was "double-goer," twelve spaces, and it took me the longest time and a dictionary to come up with the word "doppelganger."

Growing up in the midst of a large family, I had never registered the visitations from my presence, at those rare moments when I was alone, as something strange. The first time I was aware of it was when I was taken from Betty and put in a white room. After that, I occasionally had the sensation that there was someone walking beside me or sitting behind me, always just beyond my peripheral vision. One of the reasons I let the dog live inside was that it kept away this presence, which over the years had grown to seem anxious, needy, helpless in some way I could not define. I had never before thought of the presence in relation to my

twin, who'd grown up not an hour's drive away from me, but that night the combination of the phone call out of the blue and the twelve-letter word in my puzzle set my thoughts flowing.

Betty had told me all she knew of the circumstances of my birth. She was never one to keep things from people for their own good. She always let you have the truth square. But as I'd never thought to ask her about my brother she hadn't talked about him. Nor had any of my siblings—mainly because I don't think they really cared. Perhaps they didn't even associate me with the Lashers. I searched my memory and could not pull out much, except that my twin had been a boy, born first. I had no idea what the Lashers had named him. Of course, we were fraternal twins and supposedly no more alike than any other brother and sister. So I was free, that night, to actually hate and resent him. I'd heard my birth mother's voice for the first time. He'd heard it all his life.

She had called herself, simply, my mother. Not my birth mother—that careful, distancing term—but my mother. It could have been plain arrogance, but then there had also been distress in her tone. My brain had taped the eight words she'd said. All that night and the next morning, too, they played on a loop. By the end of the second day, however, the intonation grew fainter, and I was relieved that on the third day it stopped.

On the fourth day, she called again.

She began by apologizing: "I am sorry to bother you." She went on to say that she had always wanted to meet me but had been afraid to find out where I was. She said that George, my father, was dead and she lived alone and that my twin brother was a postal worker in Bismarck. It was then that I couldn't help myself. I had to ask his name.

"Linden," she told me. "It's an old family name."

"Was mine an old family name as well?" I asked.

"No," she said, "but it matched your brother's name."

She told me that George had written my name down on the birth certificate, but that they had never seen me. She told me that he had died of a heart attack, and she had nearly moved down to Bismarck to be near Linden, but she couldn't sell her home. She said that she hadn't known I lived so close by or she would have called me long before. Her light, conversational chatter must have caused a dreamlike amnesia to come over me, because when she asked if we could meet, if she could take me out to dinner at Vert's Supper Club, the only place in the area that served full dinners with drinks, I said yes and agreed on a day.

When I finally hung up the phone, I stared for a long time at the little log fire in my fireplace. I'd laid the fire before the call and had been looking forward to popping some corn. Whenever I did, I threw kernels high in the air for the dog to catch. Now I was gripped by something new—a dreadful array of feelings. Which should I choose to succumb to first? I couldn't decide. The dog came and put his head in my lap, and we sat there until I realized that one of the reactions I could have was numbness. Relieved, feeling nothing, I let the dog out, let him in, and went to bed.

She was shorter than me. And so ordinary. I was sure that I must have seen her in the street, or at the grocery, or in the bank, perhaps. It would have been hard not to have crossed paths with her at some point around here. But I would not have suspected her of being my mother. I could detect nothing familiar or like myself about her.

We did not shake hands or hug. We sat across from each other in a leatherette booth.

"You aren't . . ."

"Retarded? Lame?"

She composed herself. "You got your coloring from your father," she said. "George had dark hair."

Nancy Lasher had red-rimmed blue eyes behind bifocals, a sharp nose, a tiny, lipless bow of a mouth. Her hair was typical for a woman of seventy-seven—tightly permanented, gray-white. At one time, she had been a handsome woman, I thought, with strong features. Now she wore stained dentures, big earrings made of cultured pearls, a pale-blue pants suit. Walking in, I'd noticed her square-toed lace-up therapy shoes. There wasn't anything about her that called to me. She was just any little old lady you wouldn't want to approach. People on the reservation didn't go near women who looked like her—I can't say why. A mutual instinct for avoidance, perhaps.

"Would you like to order?" she asked, touching the menu. "Have anything you like—it's all on me."

"No, thank you, we will split the check," I answered.

I'd thought about this in advance and concluded that, if she wanted to assuage her guilt in some way, taking me out to dinner was far too cheap. So we ordered and ate and drank our glasses of sour white wine. As we did so, she talked. She asked me about myself. She drew me out, as they might say in a novel.

She made sounds of interest and surprise and sympathy. She said that she admired me. We got through the dinner of walleye and pilaf. Tears came into her eyes over a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

"I wish I'd known you were going to be so normal. I wish I hadn't ever given you up," she said.

I was alarmed at the effect that these words had on me, and quickly asked, "How's Linden?"

Her tears dried up and her face became sharp and direct.

"He's very sick," she said. "He's got kidney failure and is on dialysis. He's waiting for a kidney. I'd give him one of mine, but I'm a bad match and my kidney is old. George is dead. You are your brother's only hope."

I put my napkin to my lips and felt myself floating up off my chair. Someone floated with me, just barely with me, and I could feel his anxious breathing there. Now would be the time to call Sheryl, I thought. I should have called her before. She won't believe this. It seemed best to me, too, not to believe what I had just heard and felt. I had a twenty-dollar bill with me, and I put that money on the table and walked out the door. I got to my car, but before I could get in I had to run to the scarp of grass and

weed that surrounded the parking lot. I was heaving and crying when I felt Nancy Lasher's hand stroking my back. It was the first time my birth mother had ever touched me, and although I quieted beneath her hand, I could detect a stupid triumph in her murmuring voice. She'd known where I lived all along, of course. I pushed her away, repelled by hatred, like an animal sprung from a trap.

"What should I do?" I asked Sheryl.

"I'm calling Cedric." He lived in Bismarck. "Listen here, Tuffy. I'll get Cedric to go to the hospital and pull the plug on this Linden, and you can forget this crap."

That was Sheryl—who else could have made me laugh under the circumstances?

It was the morning after the dinner, and I was still in bed. I'd called in sick for the first time in years.

"You're not seriously even considering it," Sheryl said. Then, when I didn't answer, "Are you?"

"I don't know."

"Then I really am calling Cedric up. Those people ditched you. They turned their backs on you. They would have left you in the street to die. You're *my* sister. I don't want you to share your kidneys. Hey, what if I need one of your kidneys someday? Did you ever think of that? Save your damn kidney for me!"

"O.K.," I said.

"I love you," she said, and I said it back.

"Tuffy, don't you do it," she warned, but her voice was suddenly small, vulnerable.

After she hung up, I called the numbers on the card my mother had given me and made appointments for the tests.

While I was down in Bismarck, I stayed with Cedric and his wife, whose name is Cheryl with a "C." She's a quiet person, but she put out little towels for me that she had appliquéd with the shapes of wild animals. And tiny motel soaps she'd swiped. She made my bed. She tried to show me that she approved of what I was doing, although the others in my family did not. She is very Christian. But this was not a do-unto-others sort of thing for me. I've already said that I don't seek pain, and I would not have contemplated going through with it unless I found the alternative unbearable.

All my life, knowing without knowing it, I had waited for this to happen. My twin had been the one beside me, just out of sight. He did not know that he had been there, I was sure. He did not know that when I was stolen from Betty and alone in the whiteness he had held my hand, sat with me, and grieved. And now that I'd met his mother I understood something more. In a small town people knew everything; they knew what she had done by abandoning me. She'd have had to turn her fury with herself, her shame, on someone else—the child she'd chosen. She'd have blamed Linden. I had felt the contempt and the triumph in her touch. I was grateful now for the way things had turned out. Before we were born, my twin had had the compassion to crush me, to improve me by deforming me: I was the one who was spared.

"I'll tell you what," the doctor, a woman, who gave me the results of the tests and conducted the interview said. "You are a match, but I know your story. And I think it only fair that you know that Linden Lasher's kidney failure is his own fault. He has issues. He tried to commit suicide with a massive dose of acetaminophen, aspirin, and alcohol. That's why he is on dialysis. I think you should take that into account when making your decision."

Later that day, I sat with Linden, who said, "You don't have to do this. You don't have to be a Jesus."

"I know what you did," I said. "I'm not religious."

"Interesting," Linden said. He stared at me. "We sure don't look alike."

I realized that this was not a compliment, because he was nice-looking. He'd got the best of his mother's features. But there was something else, too—his eyes shifted around the room. He kept biting his lip, whistling, rolling his blanket between his fingers.

"Are you a mail carrier?" he asked.

"I work behind the counter, mostly."

"I've got a good route," he said, yawning. "A regular route—I could do it in my sleep. Every Christmas, my people leave me cards, money, cookies, that sort of thing."

"Did you ever think," I said, "that there was someone walking your route just beside you or just behind you? Someone there when you closed your eyes, gone when you opened them?"

"No," he said. "Are you crazy?"

"That was me," I said.

I picked up his hand, and he let it go limp. We sat there together, silent. After a while, he pulled his hand out of mine and massaged it as though my grip had hurt.

“I don’t like you,” he said. “This was my mother’s idea. I don’t want your kidney. I don’t want a piece of you inside me. I’d rather get on a list. Frankly, you’re kind of a disgusting woman. I mean, I’m sorry, but you’ve probably heard this before.”

“No,” I said. “Nobody’s ever told me that.”

“You probably have a dog,” he said. “Dogs love whoever feeds them. I doubt you could get a husband, or whatever, unless you put a bag over your head. And even then it would have to come off at night.”

“Are you saying this to drive me away?” My throat clamped down on my voice. I swallowed, drew a deep breath to stop the shakes that had started in my body. “You want to die. You don’t want to be saved, right? I’m not saving you for any reason. You won’t owe me anything.”

“Owe you?”

He seemed genuinely surprised. His teeth were so straight that I was sure he’d had orthodontic work done when he was young.

He started laughing now, showing all those beautiful teeth. He shook his head, wagged his finger at me, laughing so hard he seemed overcome. When I bent down awkwardly to pick up my purse, he was infected by such a bout of hilarity that he nearly choked. I tried to get away from him, to get to the door, but instead I backed up against the wall and was stuck there in that white, white room. ♦

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