

The Words That Would Fix This Thing

By Jackie Shannon-Hollis

On the Sunday that Paul and Dee went through the things of their marriage, to decide who got what, Carl and I took their son on a hike up the gorge. Paul and Dee meant to have any of the bickering that came of the divvying all decided by the time we got back with Nick. When we left them on their porch in the city, Paul was rubbing his face with both hands and Dee had her jaw set like it was fixed in cement. My husband Carl was driving. He turned the corner and we couldn't see Paul and Dee any more. Carl said "Oh, God," so quiet I wasn't sure I heard it, or whether he even knew he'd said it.

Nick was in the back seat, his legs stretched out clear to the opposite door. That's how big he'd gotten. He was sixteen and the little boy of him was almost completely gone. He listened to music on his iPod and looked mostly at the tiny screen there, hardly ever looking at the road ahead, or at the Columbia, the river that ran next to the freeway. The white cords from the ear buds trailed down the front of his blue t-shirt, which was soft and faded and had frays at the neck. Nick had always been a boy who got attached to a piece of clothing and Dee would have to talk him into taking the thing off for a cleaning (the pajama bottoms with a sail boat print, the New York Yankee's baseball cap he got from a trip with his dad, a braided wrist band we'd brought him from Mexico). This blue shirt had the look of that, of something favorite, but we didn't see Nick as often these days, so it was hard to know.

For the forty-five minutes up the Columbia Gorge, Nick didn't say a word. He thumbed through the music on his iPod and either ignored or didn't hear Carl and I making talk we hoped would pull him in. It was the middle of October. It had rained the day before, but on that Sunday the sky was the crisp clear that Oregon gives as a gift only in the fall. Nick wasn't appreciating that.

Partway there, I reached to put a Kleenex in the trash bag that hung on the back of the seat. My arm brushed against Nick's knee, the coarse hair there. I pulled my hand back quick, but not before Nick's head snapped up and he moved his leg in a fast way, like he was taking something back.

Earlier in the summer we'd helped Paul and Dee put a new lawn in their yard. It had been a while since we'd seen Paul and Dee, and longer since we'd seen Nick because, over the last few years, his friends had taken a bigger place in his life. That was before Paul and Dee's divorce was anything we even knew could be a possibility.

It got warm and we were all running sweat. Nick pulled off his t-shirt and my eyes kept coming back to him. The way his chest had filled out. To the flat of his stomach. The small trail of hair that started below his naval and disappeared under the band of his shorts. It had all happened so fast and it made me shy, not sure of myself with him. Over the last few years, I'd already lost the easy way I had with Nick, how I used to tickle him or pull him onto my lap. But now it was this, something more to get used to, the way his voice had deepened and his body had gone from boy thin to something else, something more like a man. I had to make myself look away and it wasn't the sun that brought out the redness in my face.

But then in the heat of that early summer day, when we took a break for lunch, Carl did the same dumb joke he always did with Nick: stuck something, this time it was two grapes but it could have been anything (a French fry, a pickle), up his nose and turned to Nick. Carl kept on with the most serious conversation he could muster. It was in that moment I saw Nick's old grin, the wide one that made two little creases on each side of his mouth and opened up to a chuckle. Nick's chuckle, like two small hoots of an owl, was followed by the bigger laugh, big strong hoots, that had kept Carl going all these years, doing those silly things. It was the laugh I'd first heard from Nick when I'd held him at his baptism and he'd found humor in the minister's wet touch on his forehead.

But on the drive up the Gorge, Nick wasn't even giving us the chance to hope for that laugh, or for much of anything. Carl and I finally quit trying and didn't even say much to one another for the rest of the way to the exit. There was an ache in the car, of the loss we knew was coming, not just of Paul and Dee together, but of us with them, of us with Nick, the way it used to be; and for Nick and all the things he wouldn't say.

In the parking lot, next to the trail head, it didn't take long after we got out of the Jeep to pick up the dead fish smell in the air. It was fall and the leaves had mostly turned, orange and yellow and gold, so it should've been the smell of dried leaves and the must of earth that's finally gotten some rain after a hot summer.

No one said anything at first, but the smell didn't go away. I folded three dollar bills into a small enough rectangle to fit in the little envelope, wrote our name and license plate on it and the fact that there were three of us hiking, and put the envelope in the metal slot. "Do you smell that?" I called over to Carl and Nick. They each had a boot up on the bumper of the Jeep, leaned over tying their laces, not talking. "Yeah," said Carl. Nick didn't look up. Thick chunks of his brown hair had fallen forward and I couldn't see his face. He still had the music in his ears.

We left the parking lot and the sound of the water got louder and the smell stronger. The trail ran beside the creek, which was still hidden by trees and undergrowth. By the time we started on the trail, the smell had settled deep in my throat and I had an urge to gag.

Instead, I got up in front of Nick and stopped him by putting both hands on his shoulders. He stepped back and I let go, but not before I felt him there, through his shirt, his shoulders were round and strong and there was the sinew, the fine strings of deltoids under my thumb. After I let go, I mouthed in a big way, "Can you hear me?" Nick rolled his eyes and pulled the ear buds out. "No music on the trail." I was surprised at how clear I said it, without any of the worry that was in me. "You can listen to the sound of the creek, the wind." I said it in the way I used to tell him, on an overnight with Carl and me, that he couldn't have any more ice cream or that it was time to go to bed. "You can listen to Carl make stupid jokes, you can listen to me, or you can ignore us. But enough with the music." Nick rolled his eyes again and jammed the cords into his pocket. That's when I wasn't so sure whether my voice had been clear and calm, or if I'd said enough or too much, or if this was even the right thing we were doing with Nick today.

The trail dipped down and there was a clearing to the creek. The water was low. In some places it was small pools amid big flat rocks. The creek was thick with salmon, live and dead and dying. Most of them had lost the rainbow of their scales and instead had gray and white spots of flesh that looked like it had been torn or bitten. Some of the fish were in the small pools, fanning their tails. Others tried to move up the creek, curling into U's made of heads and tails and then snapping themselves flat and leaping, just a few inches further up. Sometimes they'd get to a place where there was more water but it was flowing against the direction they were headed and

it was hard work. There were so many salmon, that if we'd wanted to we could have walked across the water on dying fish.

We were in a row, next to this place by the creek and I was between Carl and Nick. Nick looked over me, to Carl. "Why are they like that?" Nick's voice had the rough sound that came from a long time of not talking. His voice made all the other sounds drop away, the creek, the wind, the slap of the salmon on rocks, all got quiet when Nick spoke.

Carl said it was spawning season. He said it like Nick had been talking the whole time we'd been together, without any surprise and not too many words. "They're trying to get as far upstream as they can before they lay their eggs and fertilize them, before they die."

I was glad when Nick asked the next question. "But why do they look like that, all torn up?" Because even though I'd grown up in Oregon, had hiked along plenty of creeks and rivers, and had once caught a salmon, I'd never hiked when the spawn was happening. I didn't see how this smell, this ugly flesh, could have anything to do with making life.

"I'm not really sure," Carl turned and started up the trail. "It has something to do with them going from salt to fresh water."

I followed Carl. The trail was still damp from the rain the day before. That, mixed with the pine needles and leaves, made the ground spongy and like the quiet of walking on carpet. I stopped a way on, and looked back. Nick was still standing by the creek. He'd picked up a branch and was poking at one of the fish. Carl stopped too, just in front of me. He put a hand on my shoulder when I opened my mouth to say something to Nick. "Let's go." Carl's voice was just loud enough for me to hear.

Carl and I went around a small bend and up the trail. "You don't have to hover like that." Carl didn't turn when he said it, but I could hear him because the creek had dropped away below us and it was quieter here. And because he'd raised his voice a little, so I'd be sure to hear. "You just have to give him some room to get through this."

How he said this, like he knew better than me what Nick needed, made me mad. But my voice was soft when I said, "I'm not hovering." Soft but with some edge to it, that said Carl was wrong, that we needed to watch Nick, needed to take extra care of him. "I'm just worried about him." I said. "He needs to talk."

“You’re the one who needs to talk.” Carl pulled a red bandana from his pocket and wiped his forehead with it. “You’ve done nothing but talk about Paul and Dee since the day they told us.” He put the bandana back in his pocket. “It doesn’t make any difference.”

Even though what he said had some truth in it, I was embarrassed. Apparently I’d been tiring Carl out with all my talk. But it was the way I’d always worked through things, chewing on them with my words. I put my hands on my hips, my head forward a little, to say the next thing.

“Honey.” Carl tilted his head to the side, and he said this with a coax to it, a way he had of trying to herd me away from being mad. “I don’t want to fight. Nick just needs us to be with him. Can you do that, can you just be with him and not push it?”

Before I agreed to anything, Nick was there, quiet behind us. There was no way to know if he’d heard us or not, but it was like his eyes took a step back. He stopped on the trail and looked from one of us to the other, Carl and I facing each other, me with my hands still on my hips. Maybe that’s why, when I said in a big fake voice, “Well look who’s here, we were wondering if you were going to join us,” I was embarrassed again. Carl turned around and moved on up the trail.

Nick still had the branch in his hand and he used it as a walking stick. He was quiet for awhile and I wasn’t sure what he was talking about at first when he said, “I don’t see why they have to die and get all messed up like that.” Nick swung the stick up just above our heads, at a cobweb that was strung from a tree on one side, to a boulder on the other. “Just to make more fish.”

Partly because of what Carl had said, but more because I didn’t have the answer, I didn’t say anything back to Nick. Just walked along beside him as the quieting of the creek mixed in with the small breeze and with the leaves letting go and ticking down.

Paul and Dee asked us to be Nick’s godparents before Nick was even born. We’d been at their house for dinner and Dee told us that Nick had just started to kick. We took turns putting our hands on Dee’s stomach and Dee tried to tell us what it was like, to feel him inside her. There was a moment of quiet when she couldn’t find the right words, a moment when it was as if we were listening for the drum of his feet against her stomach. In that quiet, she told us about how she and Paul had agreed we were the ones to ask, before any of their brothers or sisters or any of their other friends. Dee said, “We want him to have second parents, the kind he can go to

when he can't go to us." I hadn't known what it would mean, how hard it would get to be, how I'd hit a point when I didn't know what to say to him.

The trail took us up in switchbacks for about a mile and a half, then there was a straight and steady rise. We met a few people coming back the other way. There were two young women with a golden lab. Nick squatted down to pet the lab that had gotten ahead of the women. When they came along and apologized about their dog, Nick stood up quick and moved to catch up with us again, his head down and his hair covering his face. When had he gone from being such an open boy, who'd talk to anyone, to this way he was so awkward with pretty women, with strangers, with old friends?

A short way on, Nick called out to us. "Hey." The sound of this was louder than anything he'd said that day; it had more hope in it. "Look what I've got." Carl and I turned back and Nick came toward us, his hands held out in front of him, in a kind of balancing back and forth. A small snake, black with white stripes, dropped from one hand to the other, curling around and trying to slip away. "It's a snake." Nick's eyes were wide and the turning up of his mouth held the old joy that always used to be a part of being with Nick.

We were close enough now that I could reach out too. Nick let the snake drop in my hands, then put his hands under mine to catch it again. Snakes were something I'd never minded much. I always found a strange comfort at the feel of them in my hands, especially these thin ones, garter snakes.

"Can I keep it?" Nick wasn't really asking and he answered before we could say anything. He said, "I'm going to keep it," before I could say all the things that were reasons he couldn't: that you don't take things from the forest, how would he carry it for the rest of the hike, how would he carry it in the Jeep, that Dee wouldn't want him to have a snake in the house and wouldn't take care of it when he went to his dad's place. That the snake would die and be another disappointment to Nick.

Before I could even consider whether I should try to stop Nick, it was Carl who said, "Oh, Nicky." But then Carl noticed my own quiet, maybe read all the words that were in me. He just said, "Yeah," and his voice lifted up and away from what he'd been thinking before. No became yes. "Okay, then. Carl said. He started up the trail again. "We should be getting close to the falls, then we can eat something."

At first I wasn't sure if the sound was the falls or not, then it picked up and got louder, the air cooled and there was a dampness to it. The trail opened out to a clearing under the trees, where the water coming from the side of the mountain was loudest. The ground here was bare; a place where people stopped over the years to watch the waterfall, which was up and off to our left. We were midway between where the falls started and where it ended, the place where we could see the white of the water coming down, catch the prism colors in the mist, see the land of the water in the big pool that spread out from white to calm below us.

We were quiet again, in a row like before, Carl and me and Nick. Here the air was clean and smelled of cedar and fir and compost. Nick had taken the snake out of his pocket. He dropped it from hand to hand, like the water in that waterfall.

Carl stepped back and slipped the pack off. "I'm hungry," he said. "Let's see what we've got here." There were no surprises, it was what we always took on a hike: peanut butter and jam sandwiches, cheddar cheese and mayonnaise sandwiches, Frito chips, oatmeal cookies. Carl pulled out five sandwiches, each wrapped in its own Ziploc. They'd flattened in the pack and would be warmed up now, with the cheese soft and the peanut butter and jam melting into each other. I sat down next to Carl and pulled out napkins and water.

"Nick." Carl said.

Nick was still at the ledge, looking out at the falls. He turned around, put the snake back in his pocket, and brushed his hands on his jeans.

Carl held out a sandwich, ready to toss it to Nick. "Here's your PB&J, buddy."

"I don't really like that anymore." Nick came over and squatted down by the pile of sandwiches. "Do you have something else?"

It was in that small thing that I saw how much Carl was hurting in all this, in all the ways things had changed, but especially in the way Nick seemed to have moved away from us, the way we didn't know him so well anymore. Carl just shrugged and said, "Suit yourself."

We were quiet while we ate. The noise of the falls made it hard to talk anyway. We finished up the chips and cookies and all had long drinks of water. Nick and Carl were up, looking at the falls again. I put everything away, then stretched out my legs and rested my head on the backpack. "I could use a snooze."

My eyes weren't closed for more than fifteen seconds when Nick's voice rose up, "Where'd it go?" And it was the sound of him as a little boy, his voice breaking and thin. I sat up

and saw Nick moving back and forth over the clearing, looking at the ground, coming to rocks and shrubs, reaching in and under them. Carl started to look too and so did I.

Of course the snake had found its way out, dropped down to the ground and slipped away. It was selfish for me to have the relief, knowing that snake had gone back where it belonged. I'd always hated seeing a thing trapped and I was also glad to let go of the worry about how Nick would take care of it. But the way he was searching, his cheeks flushed red, it was another small hope that had slipped away from him and there was, again, nothing to say to make it right.

Of course I tried. "Oh sweetie," I said. "I'm sorry. I guess that snake just wanted its freedom." It was stupid of me. Carl was right, it was better not to say anything.

Nick yelled at me then. "You don't care." There were tears starting in his eyes and it was easy to see he was mad about that too. "I wanted it. I just wanted that one thing." He went past me then and I reached for him. He pushed me on the shoulder in a way that made me stumble back. "Leave me alone." His voice was deep now, with tears and anger and there was nothing in it that said he knew who I was.

Carl was behind me and he caught me and kept me standing. We watched Nick until he disappeared from the clearing and down the trail.

I turned to Carl then. My own tears had started, but they were tired, tired of trying to find the right thing to say, the words that would fix this thing. Carl put his arms around me and held me there, next to the big sound of the falls, under the trees, some green with needles and some letting go of their leaves, bit by bit.

Carl eased up on his holding and we moved apart. He reached down and picked up the backpack and we left the falls and went after Nick. He wasn't far, just a few minutes down the trail. He was on a rock at the side of the trail, sitting with his knees up and the tears coming now in a quiet way, him using the back of his hands to wipe them away.

There are some things you know, that you don't have to think about. I got up beside Nick on that rock and put both arms all the way around him. I pulled him to me and put his head to my shoulder. I kept him there, even when he first tried to pull away, even after he took a deep breath and the tears came harder for awhile, even when his snot and tears were on my shoulder. I had no words then, just the sounds of holding a child and the feel of Carl beside us.

I didn't let go until Nick said, "I can't breathe." His nose was stuffed up and the words had that sound of long cried tears.

We were all a little shy then and the best thing seemed to be to move, to go down that trail as fast as we could, our feet making a quiet pounding on that soft ground.

The fish and their smell were still there at the end of the trail. Maybe some that were alive when we came through were dead now, and maybe others had moved up a little further and laid their eggs. There was no way to tell and we didn't stop to find out.

On the drive back up along the Columbia we were quiet. The river made white crests on small waves. The light had changed and our side of the river was in shade and everything on the other side was the gold of October.