

# Winner

FICTION

BY MICHELE M. FEENEY



2006 Creative Arts Competition



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## Moses Basket

"I am Paul. My wife was Marielle. Mari was my name for her. Mari died in 1990. Our sons are Jean and Vincent. Of course, you know of our girl, Nicole. She is the reason for your visit. Nicci is who you wish to speak of, correct?"

The woman with the tape recorder nodded yes. She sat quietly, her hands in her lap, the tape whirring. "An oral history," she'd called her work, "for the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C." She waited.

Warm sun spilled across the lobby of the Montreal nursing facility, belying the frigid air outside. Paul, approaching his ninety-second birthday, was frail, but mentally sharp and far too old to worry that he would be punished for acts so long ago, especially here in the confines of St. Theresa's, an old convent converted into a home for elderly Catholics.

"Nicole was here last week and told me you would come." Paul's posture was straight on the ladder-backed chair and his speech formal. "I have her permission to tell her story. Our story. What would you like to know?"

"Begin at the beginning. Say, 1941. I'm not in any hurry. We'll stop when you are tired. I can come back if necessary. Just tell me what you remember."

"I remember it all." Paul looked out the window to the white lace of the snow-covered tree limbs. "For years, I lulled myself to sleep each night, chanting, 'The child is ours. The child is ours. The child is ours.' Over and over again."

In 1941, the French were finally aware that the Jews were disappearing from Aix-en-Provence, slowly but steadily, a few families at a time. In the parish, no one knew for certain where they were going. Some speculated, "Maybe to join their families elsewhere?" Others whispered, "To wait out the war in a work camp?" or "To hide in the crowds of the city?" But everyone knew it was nothing so benign, because the Jews were leaving their children behind whenever possible. At the convent. The sisters would take any child under five.

"We have a baby at the convent," Sister AnneMarie whispered to Mari after Mass one summer Sunday. "Only a few months old. Far too young for the convent. Can you take her home?"

Mari looked at Paul, her eyes shining. A baby! Their own boys were gangly and loud, on the edge of manhood. "Please!" she begged. And it was just that easy, Nicole coming home with them that very morning in a basket, covered with a towel like a bunch of ripe tomatoes as they walked through the busy streets peppered with Nazis.

"What shall we tell the neighbors? What will we say at church? What about our families?" Mari whispered as they hurried directly home, not stopping to visit. "How can we hide such a beautiful baby girl?" Mari peeled back the towel and looked at the sleeping baby, then quickly covered her again, taking care not to jostle the basket as they walked up the lane to their small farm on the outskirts of town.

"In these times, no one will ask." Paul

said. "The struggle will be for you not to offer. You always think people are far more interested in our business and for better reason than they are. Let's just say she's the daughter of your childhood friend, in Paris, here for safekeeping until the war passes. Safer in the country than in the city. Say that. No more."

The story sufficed. The next week, Sister AnneMarie pulled Paul and Mari into the chamber behind the altar and Father Lorenz dribbled water on Nicole's forehead, muttering the same chant he'd used to baptize their two sons. Then Sister AnneMarie pressed a certificate of baptism into Mari's hands, folded into quarters. "Don't lose it," she whispered. "You may need it."

When they arrived home, Mari and Paul examined the certificate and were surprised to find themselves identified as the child's

parents. Nicole Elise Lopate, born March 30, 1941, and baptized in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ on May 28, 1941, the certificate said in elegant script. With the certificate, Paul was able to obtain identification papers for Nicole. Paul put the certificate and her identification papers in the carved desk in the foyer, with the boys' certificates, their other important papers, and the family Bible.

As months and then years passed, how Nicole joined their family became less and less relevant. Paul and Mari stopped worrying that harboring Nicole created any risk to their family. Of course Nicole called Mari and Paul her *maman* and *papa*, and Jean and Vincent her brothers. It was only natural. Nicole looked like a miniature Mari, their dark hair tied into identical ponytails

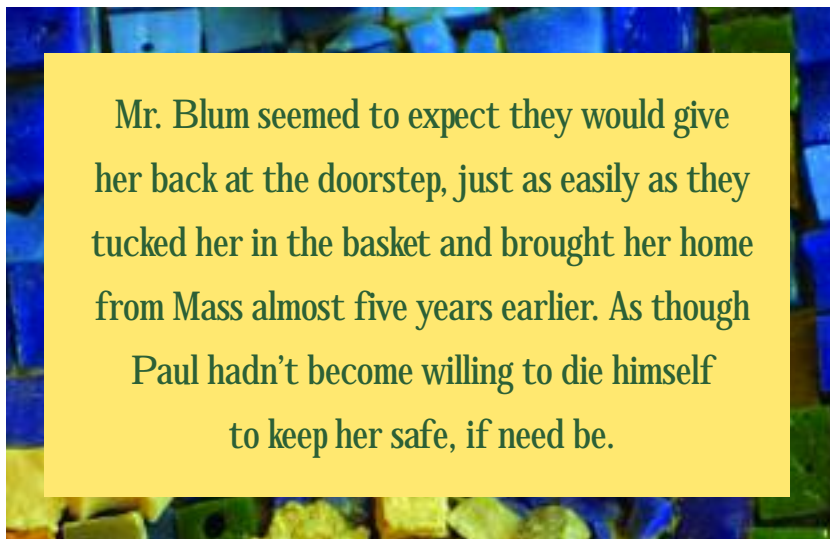
with lengths of red ribbon, cheerful though their clothes were threadbare and badly worn by then.

When Nicole was five, in late 1946, a man, Mr. Blum, came to the door looking for her. Paul never knew how Mr. Blum found out they, of all the families in the parish, sheltered Nicole. Mr. Blum introduced himself as Nicole's father and wanted her back that very day. Mr. Blum seemed to expect they would give her back at the

Mari's face light up as Nicole approached, then noticed Mr. Blum's sad eyes watching them too.

Paul and Mr. Blum silently walked to the end of the lane and then along the lane to the rectory and up the front steps. All the way, Paul tried to think of a way to claim Nicole, but every approach seemed to fall short, as if trampled under Mr. Blum's methodical steps. He knew Mr. Blum was Nicole's father; he could sense it.

Mr. Blum rang the old bell near the door. Father Lorenz answered himself, then, once he learned their business, summoned Sister AnneMarie from the convent. Soon, all four sat in the tiny office near the front door. Mr. Blum explained, just as he had explained to Paul, that his wife, Sara, brought the baby to the convent for safekeeping and now Mr. Blum wanted her back. He wanted to make a home here in Aix-en-Provence again, just as



doorstep, just as easily as they tucked her in the basket and brought her home from Mass almost five years earlier. As though Paul hadn't become willing to die himself to keep her safe, if need be.

"How do I know she's your daughter?" Paul asked.

"She is," Mr. Blum said. "Let's go to the convent and they will say. My Sara left her with a nun there. Let's go now." Mr. Blum stared at Nicole, peeking from behind Paul in the doorway. "I grew up in this town also," Mr. Blum added, "as did Sara."

"Nicci, go to your *maman*." Paul scanned the area near the house. "Over there, in the garden. Go there. Go out the back." Paul waited until he saw Nicole run between the row of beans and strawberries, careful not to trample any plants. He saw

before the war. With Nicole.

Paul's breath was gone. His hands were cold. How could this be happening? Until an hour ago, he believed, as did Mari still, that all Nicole's relatives were long since dead. No Jews other than Mr. Blum had returned to Aix-en-Provence, so far as Paul knew. Paul could not fathom a way he could cooperate to return Nicole or how Mari could pack even the smallest and least significant of Nicole's things. How they together could explain to Nicole that her life so far was being erased. After a few moments, he realized he simply could not think and began listening to the conversation swirling around him.

"And your other children? Sara?" Sister AnneMarie asked Mr. Blum. Paul realized from Sister AnneMarie's manner that she

must remember Sara and other children from when Nicole was left behind.

"Gone," Mr. Blum said, his demeanor and tone throwing a steel door in the way of anyone having any interest in discussing that matter further. Paul felt Nicole slipping away. How could there be any other result?

Father Lorenz broke into the lull in the conversation. "This is more complicated than one might think. The child has been baptized. She is Catholic. You are a Jew, correct?"

"Yes, and Nicole is a Jew."

"There is where we differ. She has been baptized and placed with a good family. She is Catholic now." Father Lorenz opened a church register on the credenza next to his desk. Paul realized he was looking for the date of Nicole's baptism.

"May, 1941," Paul volunteered, suddenly grounding himself again.

Father Lorenz located the line, turned the book so it was facing Mr. Blum, and pointed to the reference. "See," Father Lorenz said, "May 28, 1941. She became a member of our church that day."

"That was just to protect her, no?" Mr. Blum asked. "So she would have papers?"

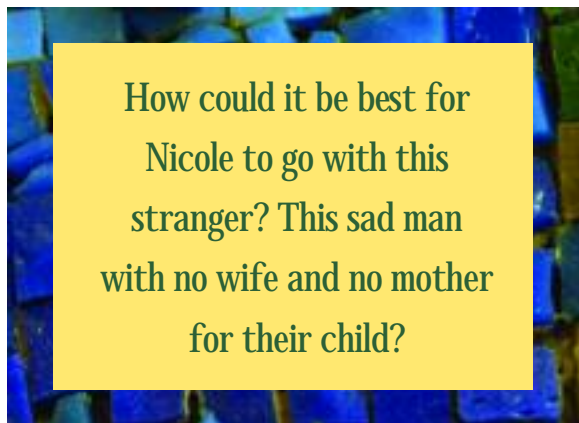
"She was baptized just as any other Catholic child. I performed the ceremony myself." Father Lorenz nodded toward Sister AnneMarie and said, "Sister was my attendant at the ceremony. Paul and Mari were here too. The child's certificate was issued. We accepted her as a member of our church." He stopped and stood, then said, "A minute, please," and moved behind his desk and extracted a paper.

"This is not the first of these situations," Father Lorenz said. "In fact, the Holy Father has issued a directive. In October. Children who have been baptized belong to our church and our parish. And Nicole has been treated as a member of Paul's family. Nicole *is* a member of Paul's family. You should be grateful. He and Mari have kept her safe all these years. Have raised her well.

She does not know you. Does not even know of you."

Paul could not believe his ears. It sounded as though there could be a reprieve possible. He felt as though Father Lorenz' words suddenly, almost magically, transformed him from the hunted to the hunter. Paul looked closely at Mr. Blum. Mr. Blum's eyes darted from Father Lorenz, to Sister AnneMarie, and then rested on Paul.

"Certainly, I'm grateful," he said. "You saved my daughter's life. All of you together. But it is fact that she is my daughter." He slumped in his chair, then added, "I did not anticipate this fight. I thought once I found her, and she was alive, I could begin again.



She is my only surviving child."

It seemed unfair that Mr. Blum should lose this child too, Paul thought. But maybe there was another way to look at this circumstance. A way they could find fairness, even justice, in keeping Nicole with them. How could it be best for Nicole to go with this stranger? How could it be fair that Mari give her Nicci away, to this sad man with no wife and no mother for their child? For Nicole to leave their home and the only family she knew? It was his responsibility to protect Nicole, just as he always had. Nicole had no voice here. He would be her voice. Do what was best for her. Paul chose a position he would not revisit. Nicole was their child, his and Mari's. Paul stood.

"Father Lorenz has spoken. The Holy

Father has addressed this issue. Nicole stays with us."

A single sob tore from Mr. Blum's throat, then he turned steely. "This is not over," he said. "It will never be over. She is my child."

Paul waited a few minutes as the silence lengthened, then moved to the door, leaving Father Lorenz and Sister AnneMarie to find a way to escort Mr. Blum from the rectory.

That very night, Paul told Mari what had happened and she became instantly panicked and alarmed.

"What should we do?" she asked. "What is the right thing to do?"

"What is right in justice or what is right in feeling?" Paul asked.

"Both," she answered.

Paul sat quietly for a few moments, choosing his words carefully. "In justice, we should give her to him. His wife left Nicole at the convent to keep her safe, not to see her baptized and then given away. But justice is unthinkable. As months and years passed, I stopped even considering that a family might return. Nicole has no thought of another family." Paul looked at Vincent's sketch of Nicole on the mantel behind Mari's shoulder, remembering the fall day Vincent

had persuaded his young sister to sit still long enough for the pencil drawing to be made. Nicole and Mari shared the same dark hair, almond-shaped dark eyes, petite build. "I believe God found Nicci for our family and he found our family for Nicci. If doing God's will is not justice, what is? She is our child. Your child. We can keep her and we will."

Mari sat without speaking, conflicting thoughts racing across her slim face. "What you say is right. Leaving our home would devastate Nicole. Nicole's mother chose life for her, nothing more. This is where Nicole's life took her. This is where God brought her. Years passed. She is our child," Mari nodded. "We won't speak of this again. The choice is made."

Of course, it was not so easy. Mr. Blum, one of the very few Jews who ever returned to Aix-en-Provence, wandered the streets inconsolably. He took to standing at the end of the lane, waiting for Nicole and Mari to pass on the way to and from school. The church was so powerful and Mr. Blum so broken and so distant from other Jews, that he didn't pose much of a real threat yet, but still. He would possibly make plans and find help in time. Even now, he made Mari so uncomfortable.

"He was standing at the end of the lane again today," Mari complained. "Nicole asked, 'Why is that man so sad?' I walk her to and from school and to her girlfriends. Everywhere. To be with her every minute is not practical. Maybe we should tell her? The whole story?"

"Never. It would end her childhood," Paul said. "No."

A few months later, after learning that Mr. Blum asked Sister AnneMarie to tell Nicole her story, Paul and Mari began to discuss moving. The town was sad and broken, like Mr. Blum, and nothing like the cheerful place they remembered from before the war. Once the discussions began, they talked of little else. The boys were willing. They placed a big map on the wall in the dining area and debated. Australia? United States? Canada? Finally, they decided on Montreal, where Mari had a cousin. The farm sold for a few thousand francs. The animals a few thousand more.

Paul again cautioned that Mari shouldn't say when or where they were moving. Only a few friends would have any sincere interest in where they were going and they wouldn't likely keep in touch with even those few after a year or two. It took only a few months from the time they decided to move until Paul, Mari, the two boys and Nicole were on a big ship bound for Canada, and only two weeks after that, they saw Halifax from the deck. They took a train to Montreal, surrounded by travelers speaking French. Paul watched out the train window as mile after mile passed. He prayed he would never see or hear from Mr. Blum again.

Paul stopped, and the woman looked up from her lap, where a balled-up linen handkerchief revealed that she wept during the story.

"I haven't seen a real handkerchief for many years," Paul said. "Mari loved to embroider. She tried to teach Nicole, but Nicole never took to it."

The woman looked down at the piece of cloth absentmindedly. "My grandmother also loved to embroider. She was never happy with my work, but she tried to teach me." The tape recorder beeped, signaling the end of the tape.

"Wait," the woman said, then flipped the tape, and pressed a button to begin side two. "So what happened?" the woman asked. "Did you ever tell Nicole?"

"Of course. That's not the kind of secret you can keep forever. Strange, but once we were here, we felt so much safer and we began to talk more openly as Nicole grew older. Remember our boys also; we couldn't ask them to hide the truth. So eventually, the whole story came out and Nicole understood what happened. Now she has children and grandchildren of her own. She lives in Toronto."

"Did you ever hear from Mr. Blum?"

"No, we did not." Paul hesitated, eyes misting for the first time. "Just before she died, Mari told me that she sent a letter each year to Sister AnneMarie, up until the time Sister AnneMarie died in the mid-seventies, letting her know how we were doing and especially about Nicole. Mari was a very kind woman. Far kinder than me. She would mail it while we were on our summer holiday, from a variety of locations, so she never told where we lived specifically. I expect Mari told Sister AnneMarie to share news of Nicole with Mr. Blum."

"Did Nicole ever contact Mr. Blum?"

"Nicole never expressed much interest. At least not to me. She will travel to France next summer and may visit Aix-en-Provence, but anyone related to her is many years gone, I expect." Paul hesitated. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"When you interviewed Nicole, what did she say? Did she have a good life? Does she think we did the right thing?"

The woman hesitated and appeared to choose her words carefully. "Nicole is happy," the woman finally said. "She has a good life. She loves you and her brothers very much and loved Mari. I agree that she doesn't express curiosity about Mr. Blum or what happened to her family. I can't imagine that she isn't consumed by curiosity and anger, but she is not."

"Why do you say that?" Paul asked, taken aback. Up until this moment, the woman seemed a professional and dispassionate interviewer. She nearly spit the last sentence, however, then visibly bit her lip as though she said too much.

The woman turned off the tape recorder. "This isn't really part of the interview so I don't need to record." She spent a few minutes packing her equipment and Paul thought she was possibly buying time or maybe decided not to speak further.

Finally, she looked at Paul. "I am out of bounds to continue, but I find I must. It seems impossible that no one has confronted you, acknowledged the guilt you clearly feel, or you would not have asked the question you just did."

"I am a Jew," she continued, her words like four individual bullets. "You ask whether what you did was right? How can you even consider that you might have been right? You should have given Nicole back. Had your own baby, if you and Mari wanted another child. You were young enough to have your own daughter if you wished to."

She shook her head in disbelief.

"Poor Mr. Blum. You stole the only part of his Sara he had. His only family. Just because you could, with the support of your church. Didn't you think about how few of our children were left?"

The woman shivered, then wiped tears collected along the bottom of her strong jaw. With that, the woman buttoned her coat and walked out, leaving Paul staring out onto the lacy trees of the courtyard, once again, back to 1941. 