Retracing Nick

From inside the house I didn’t hear the brakes squeal or the shouts, but somehow I knew exactly what the frantic pounding on my front door meant.

“Where’s your phone?” the young man blurted as I opened the door. His face was pale and it wasn’t just the lack of a summer tan. I waved my hand vaguely toward the kitchen and our blue princess phone. It was 1976 and cell phones didn’t exist.

As I pushed past him out the front door, I pointed, “The phone’s in the kitchen and the baby’s in the bedroom.”

He gave me a blank look, probably wondering if I’d mistaken him for our regular babysitter and how he’d gotten himself into this mess. He had simply run to our house because it was the closest, right across from Becker Elementary where our son, Nick, attended.

At six, Nick was a whirling dervish of a kid. Because of his hyperactive behavior, he’d already been kicked out of preschool and Sunday school. Kindergarten hadn’t gone so well either, but luckily this year he’d landed in Mrs. Ferrini’s first grade. She saw him as a high-energy gifted kid rather than a problem and he responded by giving her bragging rights to a student who scored at the high school level in several areas.

We had adopted Nick at 10 weeks, knowing that his prenatal background included alcohol and drugs. There wasn’t much information available and what the
social workers did have seemed implausible, especially the part about his 19 year old father being in medical school.

As soon as he could walk, Nick kept us in shape chasing after him in parking lots, climbing to retrieve him from the giant fir tree in the yard, and sprinting up department store stairs to intercept the elevator he’d climbed on. We’d taken several trips to the emergency room so I shouldn’t have been surprised that his latest encounter was with a car.

I pushed through the crowd and knelt in the street, holding Nick’s head and talking to him. He was struggling to breathe and I knew not to move him, but nothing more helpful. It seemed like a year before the ambulance arrived, spilling attendants from every door.

While some of them worked on Nick, another approached me with his clipboard of questions – name, address, parents. Finally, it was time to load Nick and get to the hospital. As I stood up to follow Nick into the ambulance, the attendant stepped in front of me.

“Do you know how to contact his mother?” he asked, putting his hand on my arm. I looked down at his hand – the one keeping me from entering the ambulance with my son.

“I’m his mother,” I said, watching his eyes widen in surprise. Once again I had forgotten that I am white and Nick is black.