



Missing Mom

By Joyce Carol Oates
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Introduction

"Last time you see someone and you don't know it will be the last time. And all that you know now, if only you'd known then. But you didn't know, and now it's too late. And you tell yourself How could I have known, I could not have known . . . "

Nikki Eaton never thought much of herself as a daughter. Still single at thirty-one, and entangled in an affair with a married man, Nikki remains a source of consternation to her family. Her older sister, Clare, with her handsome husband and cute kids, is the more mature, more reliable, more conventional daughter. And while their mother, Gwen, adores both of her daughters, she disapproves of many of Nikki's choices, and is open about wanting to see her settle down into a life that could bring her lasting happiness.

Following the unexpected loss of her mother, Gwen, Nikki's identity gets transformed by her profound grief. Over the course of a tumultuous year of mourning, as she confronts her true feelings about her mother and her sister, and what it means to be a daughter, Nikki comes to understand herself and what she wants in life. Her emotional journey brings sorrow, illumination, wisdom, and even an unexpected source of a nurturing love.

Questions for Discussion

1. When Nikki describes hers as "a slapdash kind of life, unmarried, unsettled-down . . . [a] life of drift and impulse," what does she mean, and how does her remark connect to her family's perception of her?
2. "Wasn't Gwen Eaton known . . . as uncomplaining, un-self-pitying, good-natured and good-hearted and indefatigably optimistic?" Does Nikki's description of her mother seem consistent with your impressions of Gwen? What do Gwen's actions at her home on Mother's Day reveal about her personality and her relationship with her daughter?
3. Two days after the Mother's Day celebration, what is the first hint that Gwen might be in serious trouble? How do Clare and Nikki decide to address their concerns? Describe the scene that Nikki finds on entering her mother's house. What emotions did this scene elicit in you?
4. When Nikki finds her mother in the garage, what does she first imagine has caused her accident? What does she hallucinate at this moment of crisis? Did you interpret her hallucination as a manifestation of her shock, or were you inclined to believe (with Nikki) that her mother might still be alive?
5. "Something ruptured and began bleeding my chest when I bent over my mother, when I saw my mother in that way." How do Nikki and Clare experience "survivor guilt" in the aftermath of their mother's murder? How does Nikki's discovery of their mother's body affect her relationship with Clare?
6. What is ironic about the identity of Gwen Eaton's killer? How was Gwen introduced to him? What prompts his vicious attack?
7. Discuss Nikki Eaton's relationship with the soon-to-be-divorced Wally Szalla. How does she feel about being "the other woman"? How does Gwen's opinion of Wally continue to impose itself on Nikki's feelings for him, even after her death?
8. What do you think explains Nikki's decision to move back into 43 Deer Creek Drive? How do her mother's friends react to Nikki's taking up some of her mother's habits—swimming at the pool, baking bread, visiting Aunt Renate? How do these activities contribute to Nikki's grieving process?
9. What role does Detective Ross Strabane play in Nikki's preparation for the murder trial? Do his attentions seem immoderate? Were you surprised that he and Nikki became intimately involved, or did their relationship seem inevitable, in some sense?
10. At the end of *Missing Mom*, Nikki has undergone a year without her mother. What kind of emotional journey has she undergone? Were there any aspects of that trajectory that you found unexpected? How has Nikki changed in the course of that year?

About the Author

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. She has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the national bestsellers **We Were the Mulvaney's**, **Blonde**, which was nominated for the National Book Award, and the *New York Times* bestseller **The Falls**. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she received the Common Wealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature and the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement.