

Nicky, the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up

The following is excerpted, with some updates and modifications, from The Song of Nick, an Emerson College Master's Thesis

by Christian O'Neill, © 2004

Hope. —RI State motto

In February of 2003, a fire destroyed the Station Nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island. One hundred lives were lost. This tragedy, among the worst nightclub fires in American history, had a traumatic effect on the people of Rhode Island. The youngest of the one hundred victims, barely eighteen, was my brother Nicholas. Already an accomplished actor and musician, Nick was a beloved member of the Rhode Island arts community. He was, of course, far more than that to my family.

In some families, there is that one child. Not everyone would understand. Particular spans in age or family structures may have something to do with it. But for some families, there's one child, blessed with a peculiar warmth, humor, strength and intuition, whose existence ties everyone else closer together, one child who is the mover and the standard for measurement of time and space and energy.

For us, that was Nicky. He was ten years my junior and as they years passed, I grew to realize that he was more like a son to me than a little brother. He was equal parts golden cherub and grinning imp, innocent/ wise, manic/serene, dazzling/quiet, unassuming/unforgettable, brilliant in all the most unconventional ways. Nick was more than glue for my family; he was its beating, glowing heart, and he was my best friend.

New Agers talk about Indigo Children, these system-busting tornadoes of wonderment who expect to be treated like royalty. And yes, Nicky found endless hilarity in his ability to absolutely lord over my mom's daycare kids (including Nicky's own best friend, Damian, who did indeed start off as a daycare kid). But to describe Nicky, to sum up his life in a phrase—Nicky was giving. Giving, selfless, physically affectionate in a way that boys usually are not, and from the youngest age, the very guardian of happiness, the youngest Catcher in the Rye (another story that, like our own, prominently features carousels). No one could ever be sad. That wouldn't stand. If he was royalty, he was the enlightened monarch of Cranston.

At the age of ten he discovered performing. Publicly, that is; he'd been imitating Elvis and Michael Jackson in the living room his whole life, not to mention doing dead-on impressions of everyone we knew behind their backs. And when he discovered theatre, we all discovered theatre.

Now Bill sings opera and I do this directing thing. It all started with that 1995 church youth ministry production of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*: Nicky as tiny precocious Linus, Billy as a lanky teenage beagle. I ran the spotlight and inwardly critiqued the director's every decision. In 1997, a coin-toss twist of fate landed me, then an AmeriCorps volunteer, in overcrowded Woonsocket Middle School, directing my first play, *The Wizard of Oz*. A boy from the school dropped out of the Scarecrow

role, and Nicky slipped in quietly. Playing the Scarecrow, Dorothy's innocent and guileless loyal friend, made a sort of indelible impact on Nicky, just as playing the Lion made a lifelong impact on a very determined WMS 8th grader named Matt. The two boys had a loose and jumpy chemistry even then, and the play became this beautiful obsession for them.

Nick and Matt did wind up back together. More unexpected turns brought them both, years later, to a place called the Stadium Theatre, which is just about the cultural Mecca of northern Rhode Island. When we stumbled into the place, to join an amateur song-and-dance fundraising group—the Encore Entertainers. Nick and Matt, charming and bright, were the company's greatest young hopes.

In 1999 I inherited the directorship of the Encore Entertainers. After a first successful production gave me a little bit of leeway, Nicky and I hatched a scheme to give him the chance to try out one of his long-time dreams—improvisational comedy before a live audience. When the main stage closed for renovations, I staged two cabaret shows in the lobby. Giving Nick at age 14 and Matt at 16 the chance to perform improv had to be slipped under the producer's radar, and it was risky. If they failed it could have been an awful blow to their self-esteem and to the group's developing reputation. Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1999, Nicky and Matt stepped onstage in between a couple of songs (and two buffet tables full of Swedish meatballs and salad) and very bluntly started asking the confused audience for suggestions.

Nick and Matt *killed*. Soon people were coming, and coming back, just to see them. The ushers all made it a point to drop what they were doing and rush out to see these two boys humiliate people in the audience, squeeze new life out of the oldest vaudeville gags, and take on the fiercest (and drunkest) hecklers. With their relaxed wiseass/ dummy chemistry, they were upstaging our best singers and dancers. People started booking them for gigs and private parties.

There was by now a general consensus that Nicky—our Nicky—could do pretty much anything. And yet, at home, he was still Nicky. Our life—our normal, real life—revolved around playing N64, taking walks to Walgreens, looking forward to annual trips to Disney World—Nicky's favorite place in the world—and watching a whole lot of TV together. He was still Nicky—adamant in his refusal to grow up, and smarter than everyone else because of it.

In May of 2000, my little group—now the Encore Repertory Company—presented its first full-length musical, *Bye Bye Birdie*. Nick, who may have been born to play Conrad Birdie, didn't have to try very hard, and neither did the gaggle of teenage girls whose job it was to fawn over him.

After that show I departed from Encore, but Nick and Matt stayed around and had a chance, that summer, to fulfill their long-time dream. They reprised Scarecrow and Lion in a (relatively) big-budget grown-up way, and Nick told me they wept a little backstage before going on, with their hands on each other's shoulders. Nick left Encore after that. The group's producer asked him to take an extended leave from the company after he demolished a table while demonstrating a pro wrestling move on Matt.

We would talk and talk about going back to the Stadium, which was now beautiful in its full renovation, but instead we floated around and did things like *Song of Mark*, a liturgical musical about the Passion story that marked the last time Nicky, Billy and myself would ever work together on a project. Immediately after that, I moved to Boston for grad school and Billy took off for California to chase the girl of his dreams. And Nicky and I were both miserable pretty much all the time. The week I left, Nick sent me a long e-mail, all about how this felt like the final nail in the coffin of his childhood, that he was losing his hold on the person he had been his whole life. And I wrote back and told him that the child inside him would never die—that it was the truest part of him. I didn't know if that stayed with him or not because he didn't write back.

Nick still acted, now almost exclusively with the All-Children's Theatre (ACT), but his real focus now was on being a full time rock star with his band Shryne. That's Shryne with a Y because, Nick would say, spelling anything with a Y is cool. Now Nick was fending off groupies; now they were calling him mini-Mick (as in Jagger) all over the Providence clubs. Nick and his rock babe Gabby, Nick the singer/songwriter, the great Nicky O. But still, at home, still just Nicky.

Nicky who went from place to place, from crowd to crowd, trying on different masks and playing different roles—and getting each one right—looking, I think, for the place where he'd most belong. Still (now more than ever, in fact), Nicky was the truest real-life *Catcher in the Rye* (which I tried to get him to read; he wasn't really the reading type). He was, like Holden Caulfield, hopeful, longing and at the same time bewildered by the world, by people, by the pain they inflict upon one another, and most of all by the appalling inevitability of growing up. Our home, at least, had been an anchor, and now, we learned, we were losing that too. After the death of my father a year earlier, my mom had fallen behind on the payments and could no longer afford to keep up with it. The house went up for sale, and our only prospect was for Nicky and my mom to move in with my grandmother, in a cramped house in Providence. For Nicky, it felt like all the goodness and joy was being suddenly, quickly drained out of his life.

In February of 2002, I received from Nicky the first draft of a play he had suddenly written about three guardian angels—a girl named Grace, a boy named Levi, and a third spirit named Cyrus who was clearly supposed to be Nicky himself. Recently deceased, they meander around New York, chatting and bickering, reminiscing about their funerals, frustrated by humans' inability to see them, angered by the world's wretchedness, mystified by God's seeming inaction, and relentlessly delivering a message of hope to an anguished young man named Adam Tyler and a street corner fortune teller, Mama Marie. The message expressed itself in different forms, but its final delivery was straightforward and simple: "Do not fear to hope." The play seemed to have sprung from an allegedly true story I used to tell Nicky when he was little, but his imagination (or, as he would say, "inspiration") had run off with it, and he had inserted himself into the tale. The play was called *They Walk Among Us*.

I think Nick was unsure of the writing. I gave him a lot of feedback and some suggestions, and he told me in response that I just hadn't really gotten it—"at all"—and then I didn't hear anything about it again.

The mysteries that followed from after that time are beyond the scope of this writing, but they are very much the subject of the 41.

The pain of loss is beyond the capability of our language to express. It is the most violent, cataclysmic and cruel of realities. Its casualties are motivation, hope, and the past. And the future. It is a dumb, stubborn thing. It turns the brightest memories against you.

This project is not just about that pain or those things, but that needs to be said. This project is also not about my mother, even though so much of what I personally have done in the past years has been for her and in response—dire, desperate response—to her unimaginable misery. We may or may not be strong because of what we have done in Nicky's name; it was all that we *could* do. It is the part of me that won't go gently into a long dark tunnel with only more darkness at its end and call that the remainder of my life, leaving eighteen years of happiness to sit under a coating of dust, allowing my family's once vibrant and always laughing existence drift into a long extended trite and hollow conversation about "moving on" and "letting go." We had never known trauma, and now we were there, inside of that word, and that would not stand. This could not be about moving on from, it would be about moving on with, and the world needed to see this, and to recognize this, and to know this. It was for this reason that even a week after the fire, we launched a celebration—celebration—of Nick's life, greatly to the surprise of many who had come prepared to mourn. But Nicky didn't want anyone to be sad.

Just like that, four years after last walking out the door of St. Jude's, the church parish where we'd been brought up, we were back, and for something unimaginable—a memorial service for Nicky. Like Nicky says in his song "*Forgotten Bliss*," which played that night, filling the space, "*Oh my darling, please take me back home.*"

Nicky, who had spent his last feverish few years trying to figure out where he fit, brought together on that night eleven hundred people.

And a year later, *They Walk Among Us* saw its first audience.

To sum up the rehearsal process in a phrase: purity of purpose. This feeling, capping off that awful year, was itself a kind of alchemy—aimlessness turned into pure drive. I wasn't alone. A fierce dedication had poured forth from this community. I spent this time worrying, working and reading everything Nicky ever wrote, and especially his writings from the painful final year of his life: his hard, irresistible journals, poems and songs, eerie and prophetic, and dreaming and bleeding.

There were no bios in the program. Instead, actors wrote testimonials about Nicky—and who he had been to them. In much the same spirit, my Director's Note read just as follows:

He walks among us

A year ago, there were no words. Language felt inadequate. Everyone's lives

(everyone who still lived) became a literal nightmare and we all said, again and again, there are no words, there are no words.

Now there are words.

A year ago, my family looked upon the prospect—the unearned prison sentence of a long life devoid of meaning, because the person around whom our lives had centered for eighteen years was torn, was ripped away, ridiculously, impossibly, and suddenly. Instantly we were on the other side of the nightly news; and everyone else was clutching their children close to them in gratitude, because we could not anymore. We looked upon the absurd prospect of years filled not with Nick but with the emptiness he left behind.

We have come to learn otherwise.

We began to learn this when eleven hundred people attended his memorial service; and in this, we think Nick learned some things also—about the purpose of his own life. That was the beginning of a year that has been as full of wonder and hope as it has been of shock and stinging separation. In the aftermath of horror, there has been the amazing, stunning blessing of Nick's continued presence; of signs and signals that have defied a thousand times over all rational logic (and on occasion the laws of physics), synchronicities that stand far outside suspicion of coincidence, and miracles that have extinguished our fear of death. It would be impossible to share with you every story, but our hope is that tonight we might share some of the hope. Although our sadness will never end, although we all might wish every second that we could have him back, to see the man he would have become...it is possible to transform sorrow into meaning.

In fact, it may be the whole point.

Yes—Nick wrote a single play in his life, completing it less than a year before the fire, and it was about teenagers who have died and become guardian angels, and one of them is clearly supposed to be Nick himself. This is not some fabrication—this is a part of the Wonder and the Hope. Tonight you will be among the first people in the world to see this play performed. You will also see his friends—just a few of the many whose lives were touched deeply by Nicky. You will see them singing and dancing and acting, in tribute and in reflection. They will each say what they need to say. We are glad to give them the chance.

But most of all—I promise you—you will see Nicky.

—Chris O'Neill