

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 5

June 2005

When Characters Die

Grant Tracey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Tracey, Grant (2005) "When Characters Die," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol5/iss1/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE
HONORABLE MENTION

WHEN CHARACTERS DIE

Grant Tracey

Nick Patterson is starting to think that his character isn't going to be around next season. He plays Chris Swados, head of UNTSO (United Nations Theatre of Special Ops), a counterterrorist organization that protects the globe from attack. This is the third year for the series *Hard Rain*, and Swados is dying from exposure to a nuclear isotope. Special Agent Rick Furey is searching for an antidote, but time's running out.

"Man, I wish they'd serve French fries with gravy," says Colin Dewars, who plays Furey, the series star.

Nick smiles as they eat in the Fox commissary, a few blocks down from soundstage twelve, where they film most of the series' interiors. Colin always misses Canada.

"It'll make you fat. You're better off." The commissary is full of long tables, long lines of track lights and quiet caterers dishing up everything from low-carb yogurt smoothies to burritos as big as your head and pepperoni calzones the size of footballs.

Colin shrugs and sips Michelob from a frosted glass. His hair, thin and high on his forehead, looks like a wet muskrat, but his face is chiseled and he has that low "Snake Plissken" voice that all action heroes seem to have since *Escape from New York*. Nick by contrast is heavy, his shoulders sag with forty-something anguish, and salt and pepper stubble dots his chin. His cheeks, from an age-old battle with teenage acne, look like overcooked lentils, and his voice, full of Regis Toomey and James Stewart, lacks military toughness. Nick has played small parts and second leads for fifteen years and Swados is the role of his career. The lollipop chomping UNTSO head is loud, passionate, and admirable. In the first season he was administratively ambiguous—an always-

by-the-book suit at odds with Furey, and viewers wondered if he were really a spook for the Slobodon Milosevic-backed terrorists. This year he is much more lovable, trying to reconcile with his seventeen-year-old son and his ex-wife, while secretly battling radiation poisoning. Only Furey knows Swados has it. If his superiors knew, Swados would be removed from duty.

"That scene today in the office was fucking great," Colin says, his bright eyes narrowing. "Your intensity gave me a lot to play on."

"Thanks." They shot two-eighths of a page, about four hours of work. They're now having a late lunch. Nick enjoys hanging with Colin. They both like hockey—Colin had gone to high school with Wayne Gretzky in Brantford, Ontario—and they are both fans of the Method style, carving out the inner lives of their characters. Swados hates ties, even though he has to wear one, and before working at UNTSO, he wiretapped for the FBI. His favorite color is blue, he loves dogs, especially yellow labs, and he likes women to be on top during sex. "I don't want my character to die," Nick blurts, embarrassed, feeling like he were seven again, and playing war in the backyard of his parents South Dakota home. He had overheard the writers talking between takes about next year and Swados was never mentioned.

"We'll find a cure. Hell, I'm Rick Furey," Colin beams as he sits back in his chair. "Relax, pal. Relax."



In seventh grade, Nick Patterson watched Mrs. Wedge cry.

He can never remember all the details of how they broke down his English teacher—images and motives disappear like chalk lines in the rain—but he remembers the guilt in his eyes and shoulders and across his chest as Mark Gunnerson and Danny Heritage led the coup. Mrs. Wedge had a wide expressive face and as she cried it somehow narrowed, the emotions caving in on her inner self. The boys laughed after she left the room.

Mrs. Wedge was attractive, and that's what makes it all seem

so weird: You'd think the boys would like her. Also a girls gym teacher, Mrs. Wedge often wore slacks and a black Danskin top and Nick saw the outlines of her aureoles, at least that's what he remembers. And twenty minutes a day, she read books to the class, including S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and, when a church burned and the greasers tried to escape from a collapsing roof and splintering wood, a sudden sadness filled her. Reading was the only time she appeared completely at ease. Hinton's words transformed her.

Nick was surprised to find out years later that S. E. was a girl. She knew boys so well, and Mrs. Wedge's voice, reading Hinton's prose, was unlike any voice he had heard in South Dakota. It didn't sound Scandinavian or have that drawn-out lilt. Her cadence was more clipped and direct. And she had a high, intellectual forehead, window-framed glasses, and light brown hair with some blonde underneath. And her smile—it started at the eyes and moved outward and always made Nick smile. She liked him, and said that he had a great sense of humor, especially when he did forensics, and a series of impressions like Bruce Lee reading Poe's "The Raven" with accompanying yells, punches, and kicks, John Wayne singing "Be-Bop-a-Lu-La," and Jimmy Stewart trying to explain to a four-year-old where babies come from.

It's episode nineteen of *Hard Rain*, and Nick drinks iced tea between takes. He and Furey have tracked an atomic device to a small airport in the Arizona desert. Some of the exteriors were photographed in Bronson Canyon, where in the 1930s Mascot Studios filmed many B-westerns around the area's caves and dry sand and Universal's Flash Gordon fought on Mars. The sky in Bronson Canyon looks bleached like a bone and the hot sun hangs high like a contact lens shimmering in colored cleaning solution. Nick prefers the controlled temperature of the soundstage, and he's glad that the art crew can make number twelve pass for a desert. Colin, the sleeves of his commando sweater pushed up above the elbows, is playing with his prop gun, slapping a clip in and out, as arc lights glint along the metal

frames of his sunglasses. The actors get directions from Leonard Hall, a twenty-five-year-old wunderkind. The writers, the Bukay brothers from Modesto, in collaboration with Hall, develop the script as they shoot, and Nick has no idea what's happening next. "Keeps everyone on edge, fresh," says Hall. "This series is about expecting the unexpected, and we want that from our actors, too."

Great way to justify chaos, Nick figures, but he's not mad about it—he doesn't have time to be. Instead, his mental energy for the past two weeks has been filled with blurred images, montages of memory: Mrs. Wedge. Somewhere between the third and fourth time she cried in front of the class, Nick decided to help. He wasn't very strong—he never sat in an aisle by a window out of fear that he'd be asked to open one and wouldn't be able to—but he was going to speak up. Danny and Mark were slouched carelessly in the hall by a fountain. It was lunch hour, and they were talking about *Playboy* and wanting to bury it in the "field" of a Playmate from Bakersfield. They were always gross, but Nick walked over, his head down, hands heavy at his sides with his binder and lunch box. "Hey, guys. Why don't you take it easy on Mrs. Wedge? She's okay. She's never—"

Mark shoved Nick hard into the lockers. Mark's dad was a cop, so he must have taught him if you're going to push someone around make it matter, and Nick's chest and the front edges of his collarbones were suddenly sore, his courage perforated. "Why don't you mind your own fucking business, huh?" Mark's eyes carried a twist of anger and guilt and they looked like the bottom of a dirty pond. Danny, his hair tightly curled, and his upper lip jagged with a cold sore in the corner, leaned over Mark's shoulder and watched Nick stagger to find his nerve.

"What did you say, faggot?" Danny asked, his words tangled up, sparking like fallen telephone lines.

"Nothing."

"Hey check out his lunch." Danny grabbed Nick's *Emergency* lunch pail and held it aloft. "The fag carries a lunch box and a thermos."

"A thermos," echoed Mark, sweat dotting the upper edges of his lip.

"Yeah. That's total faggy. It's downright salt, man, salt."

"Loserville," Mark said.

Everyone in seventh grade carried sack lunches but Nick's Mom still packed him hot chocolate or hot dogs in a thermos. Nick didn't want to change. While his friends spent money on .45 records and clothes—platform shoes and wide bell bottoms—Nick still enjoyed Strat-O-Matic baseball and playing with his Airfix army men across his green bedspread.

"Come on, give me back my thermos," he pleaded, and then Mark pushed harder, sending Nick sprawling. As he hit the floor, edges of notepaper fell from his black binder and his elbows hurt, and Danny, arms shaking like he were King Kong, jumped up and down on Nick's thermos. The plastic yielded and the thermos's fragile center cracked.

In the early morning, before Susan would drive him to Fox studios and Nick would get the day's call sheet—two pages, twelve or so hours of work—he rubbed up against his wife in bed, his insistent hard-on pleading against her left thigh.

"Nick, what are you doing?"

Susan's face was down in a heavy pillow, her auburn hair spread in adjacent directions, as his hand reached under her teddy for a breast.

"I've got to get to work—and it's been a while—and it's the morning—and—"

"And you're horny."

"Well, yeah."

She rolled over and smiled at him. She too was an actress, once, but now worked as a publicist for Paramount. "Maybe tonight. I don't feel like it right now. But the snuggle was nice," she said.

"Sure." The headboard behind her was light brown, contemporary with mission accents, and the small slits along the top looked vaguely Asian. Nick was staring into the slits. He

exhaled lightly. "But Jessica will be up late. It'll be impossible to make love." Jessica was their seventeen-year-old daughter. She would be a senior in the fall and she often had friends over, boys and girls eating Doritos and watching 1 A.M. reruns of the *Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone*. He sat up.

"We'll just have to be quiet."

Nick smiled, his erection ebbed. "I think they're writing me out of the show."

"Well, who has ever come back from radiation poisoning? Nobody that I know. This is kind of a no brainer, Nick." Dimples formed at the edge of his wife's lips.

"Well quit being so practical, huh?"

Hard Rain was in the top twenty and Nick would get residuals once the show went into syndication, so it wasn't about the money. They had already done close to sixty episodes, so he'd make a fair chunk. He just loved the show, and the crew, and working with Colin even though he was a pain in the ass and found ways—little bits of business—to steal a scene. "It's the first thing in a long time that I've done that makes me cool to Jessica and her friends. They watch the show."

"They watch the show for Rick Furey. Colin is cute, or 'hot,' as the kids today say. Face it."

"Yeah." Colin was having an affair with Midge Reynolds, who played Lauren, a double agent. Colin had only been married seven months.

Susan patted Nick's wrist. "But you're cute to me."

"Thanks." He shrugged, drinking the water he left last night at the side of the bed. "I keep thinking about Mrs. Wedge. It's weird."

"Your seventh-grade English teacher? The one that melted down in class and left the school after one year?" Susan was now sitting up, her teddy scooped low around her neck. She had a thin crease along her forehead and between her eyes that seemed more pronounced after just waking up.

"Yeah." He placed the glass back on the end table. "We're filming and I see her. Between takes she's on my mind. I—"

"Maybe she's your muse."

"No." He patted his wife's thigh. "You are."

She disagreed, saying how she was getting heavy in the legs and her boobs were sagging. "Mrs. Wedge had great boobs. You told me."

"I like your saggy boobs."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

He smiled. "I better get to work."

She scooted toward him on the bed, her feet hanging over the side. "Nick, there will be other roles—Steve Soderbergh wants you to read for a new film he's working on."

"Yeah. And the script's good, too. Damn good."

"Hey—"

"Yeah?"

She rolled back on the bed, the pillow propped behind her neck. "Lock the door. I've changed my mind."

Several days after Mark Gunnerson and Danny Heritage beat the shit out of Nick's thermos and roughed him up in the hall, Mrs. Wedge asked Nick to stay after class. English was the period before lunch. She sat behind a desk piled high with red and blue folders and a purse, with two large rings, anchored upright in front of her. It was a large purse. It looked like you could fit a typewriter in it. Mrs. Wedge touched her lips and then adjusted her glasses. "I heard that Danny and Mark gave you a hard time."

"Yeah." Nick felt puzzled. How did she know?

"Mr. Halket told me."

The history teacher. "I went to the library to check out the *Outsiders* but—"

"Sit down."

"—it was gone. So I'm reading Perry Mason and *In the Heat of the Night*."

Behind Mrs. Wedge hung faded portraits of the Presidents and inventors like Charles Richard Drew who did something or other with plasma and bloodbanks. Nick tried to read the fine print under Dr. Drew's name.

She nodded and opened her purse. Nick tried not to look—the purse seemed such a private thing—but he hoped he wouldn't glimpse a deck of cigarettes. He didn't want Mrs. Wedge to die from cancer or anything. There were no cigarettes, but he saw some Kleenex and wondered if she had been crying in other classes, too. "I just wanted to thank you, and let you know I'm okay. I'm a little emotional, and I let some of the kids get to me when they're misbehaving."

"Do you like teaching?"

"Yes, I do."

Nick nodded. He wanted to tell her that he liked having her as a teacher.

"You know. I just have a hard time with disappointment. When I was a kid if my dad said we were going to do something and then we didn't, I cried."

"You mean like going to an amusement park?"

"Yes. Coney Island? A promise broken like that. Rides. Tilt-a-Whirl, Bumper Cars, Ferris wheels. That would be hard to overcome." She reached into her purse for her lunch, a brown bag. She peeled back the plastic wrap on a sandwich. The crusts were all shaved off. She offered Nick half. "Here."

"Thanks." He slid his chair back from the desk a little. He didn't want to get any crumbs on it.

She pulled out a thermos. "This is coffee, so I don't know if I can offer you any."

"I like it."

"Well, a little bit of coffee won't hurt." She gave him the top cup to the thermos to drink out of while she poured coffee into a black mug that sported a gold treble clef. "One time, Dad promised to take us to this posh restaurant near the waterfront. I'm from New Jersey. Originally. Anyway, I had my menu all planned, Zuppa Toscana soup, spinach ravioli, and even that sparkling water from Italy, San Pellegrino, I think, and we drove by and there was a huge line and Dad was hungry and didn't want to wait." She wiped specks of crumbs from the corners of her lips. "So we went to a fish and chips place and I cried, thinking

about what I had looked forward to." She shrugged.

The coffee had a dark flavor. "Do you get sad when you read books too, like when the characters do things you don't want them to?"

"Oh, yes. Many novels never end right or they take a wrong turn half way through. That makes me sad. And I cry when characters die, especially those I love."

"Like Johnny in the *Outsiders*."

"Like Johnny."



Seven years after Mrs. Wedge left Mitchell Junior High, Nick was in a college roots rock band, doing a blend of Johnny Cash and rockabilly blues. Nick played rhythm guitar and sang occasionally. One of his songs, "Pony Boy's Blues," was a tribute to his seventh-grade English teacher. He mentioned her by name to the smoke-filled hall on the campus of South Dakota State, mumbling something about how some people were gold and some weren't and she was, and as he sang, "Johnny killed Bob Sheldon he was one mad soc / then he rescued kids from a burning church / died broken back he was *Gone with the Wind* / 'Why should I live,' was all that he said," he imagined Mrs. Wedge, older, standing against a back wall. Her face was longer, the fleshy part of her upper cheeks thinned, her mouth still a firm but sensuous line, and she was reluctantly smiling, as if she were afraid of upstaging the singer. The song slowed to a mild military rat-a-tat, and Nick's shoulders hurt and his eyes were cindered with sadness.

"Okay, Nick, are we ready?" asks Leonard Hall. He has a full face and small dark eyes. "You got your lollipop?"

"Got it." Swados loves to chew on lollipops, especially the fuzzy stick when the shards of candy grit are worn down. He breathes deeply. Nick just read the scene, and studied the lines. There is no antidote. He dies.

The director goes over it again. Rick Furey knocks out some communist pilots, the Dravec brothers by way of Yugoslavia, commandeers their plane, and, unable to defuse the bomb, decides to save Los Angeles by crashing the Cessna into a barren stretch of Arizona's desert. But Chris Swados has also stolen his way onto the plane, and he confronts Rick, encourages him to jump free, while he sacrifices himself. After all "radiation is a one way ticket, a final taxi," Swados says.

"It's a great moment. It's going to make you famous." The director rushes his words, his breath full of Polo mints. He shakes Nick's shoulders. His hair never looks combed.

Nick is disappointed. He's never asked for more money, never showed up late, and his colleagues consider him an actor's actor—at least that's what he read in last year's *TV Guide*. Colin Dewars by contrast is difficult. He shows up late, drinks too heavily, and is moody when falling in and out of love with various starlets. Of course Colin's the star—he was on the cover of *TV Guide*, arms folded across his chest, Rolex watch glinting with privilege, and Colin's blue eyes, embued with menace and charm, stared confidently into the camera. He was also buffed, having shed ten pounds off his first-year physique. Colin Dewars: sex bomb.

Colin gently slaps Nick on the shoulder. "Hey, sorry partner. I really thought I was going to find that antidote."

"Yeah." Nick shakes Colin's hand. He's not sure why—he just does it.

"Come on. Let's kick ass on this scene, now. This is going to be your moment." Colin points at him and then hugs him roughly around the neck. Nick can feel the ridged edges of the Rolex, and he tries to suppress a laugh along the inside of his upper lip. Furey always punctuates orders with a "now." "I need it, now." "Get it, now." "I'm going in, now." And here's Dewars indiscriminately throwing a Fureyesque "now" into this intimate moment. *Let's kick ass, now*. Characters, actors, they meld and mix, taking on each other's personalities and personas. Nick does the same thing with Swados.

Colin promises to let the point of view, the sympathy factor,

be all Nick's. "No Shatner moments here, pal. I'll be understated. This'll probably win you a fuckin' Emmy."

Nick smiles. He was nominated nine years ago in a supporting role for playing Henry Morgenthau in a biographical mini-series on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and America's culpability during the Holocaust. Colin is a two-time Golden-Globe winner for best actor in a dramatic series for *Hard Rain*.

The director, with dust veiled over the edges of his riding boots, leads them to their places, a mocked-up, cutaway interior of a Cessna on soundstage twelve. Hall wants to do a lot of hand-held with the steadicam for this sequence. Usually he uses a telephoto lens and sits far away from the actors, like in another county, but today he's going to be up close. At first the distance and Hall's telephoto bothered Nick—it lacked intimacy—but today, Hall seems too intimate. "It's so intense. The scene demands it." He knocks back two more Polo mints. Hall is from Chicago but he spent three years at Oxford, and has a penchant for all things English, including reading P. G. Wodehouse, eating scones and clotted cream on the set, and wearing jodhpurs as if he were about to dash off to an equestrian meet.

Nick breathes deep. The soundstage lights seem extra heavy today, sending out white bright arc glares. This is going to be Nick's last scene for the series. He checks the marks and knows where to get on what line. The last scene. "Rock on, dominate," he says, to say something. Some of the tech people, key grips and gaffers, nod at Nick, knowing this is it. Paul Bass, a director's assistant, fresh out of film school, smiles feebly from the other side of the actor's marks and gives Nick a thumbs up.



It's hard leaving a character behind. That's what Nick told Susan a few days ago, as they sipped ice tea on their back patio and watched the Saturday sun dip behind the Pacific. It was an odd day, to have free from work. It wasn't a religious Sabbath thing—Dewars just insisted on surfing Big Sur and so the set

was shut down.

"I mean, I've lived with Swados for three years now. I know him. I like him."

Susan adjusted her sunglasses, the red of the sky catching in the lenses. "I like him, too." She patted Nick's hand and recalled how much the character grew in sixty plus episodes from a stuffy by-the-book suit to a compassionate man. Susan's favorite episode was three weeks ago, when Swados had a warm reconciliation with his son. The son at first was standoffish, "you can't be out of my life for fourteen years and suddenly be back in—it just doesn't work like that," but Swados pleaded softly with his eyebrows. "You do that so well. That eyebrow thing."

Nick demonstrated, bending his head to the left, and arching the eyebrows down like forlorn cats draped on a backyard fence, and then he shrugged—his tea, caramel swirls in a glass.

"But I knew that you knew that Swados wasn't coming back. That was a scene of a dying man. The emotion in the eyes, the desperation—" She tugged at her white shorts and rubbed the back of her legs, which were sore from sitting on a lawn chair.

"They haven't told me anything. The writers are keeping it all hush-hush. The final four episodes. No leaks. Surprise, surprise." He placed quote marks around the last four words.

"Well, your character knows the truth, if you don't."

"Yeah. Swados has kind of suspected it." Nick chuckled over how often Chris Swados enters his consciousness. "You know how he likes lollipops? I don't even eat lollipops, but twice now, at Safeway, I've bought lollipops and eaten them on the way home. Me, Nick Patterson. And I even use some of Swados's expressions like 'rock on, dominate.' I just throw it into conversations, mindlessly."

"At least you haven't become a Republican like he is."

"No. That's true. But there's all these little things that were a part of Swados that are now a part of me. They both like their ties loose around their necks with one shirt button undone." Swados is also a Lakers fan and Nick has become one, too. He listed the team's field-goal percentage from last night and the

scoring averages of the starting five. And Swados hates bottled water. He won't pay for water. He drinks strictly from the fountain or tap. "You notice I haven't been buying Evian lately?"

"No wonder you're dying from radiation poisoning," Susan said.



It wasn't a smart decision, but Nick felt he had no choice. After Mrs. Wedge cried twice more in front of Gunnerson and company, and Principal Leland had to come in and give them all a talking to, and Danny snickered into the dingy shoulder of his football jersey, Nick took action.

He stole Mrs. Wedge's purse.

She had left it on the desk after English class to run some ditto copies and Nick cut back from lunch and took it. He dashed down the halls, and then hid it in his locker and told Abigail Smith, the best girl in English who wrote the longest compositions, and she told somebody or other, and Nick was called out from math class and asked by the principal to open his locker. They found the purse. His locker smelled of chewing gum and wet gym towels.

His parents were called in and he was suspended for three days.

When he came back to school he was called the "purse perv." Mark started it, and it lasted for several weeks. "Hey, purse perv, you got any tampons on you?" They also called him "Tampon Boy."

Truth was, Nick didn't intend to look in the purse, but he wanted to make sure there weren't any cigarettes in it, and as he peered between the rings, he thought of Mrs. Wedge's face, the wide, expansive eyes, and the breasts behind the Danksin, and he kind of got excited by it all. He found a box of assorted Chiclets, Kleenex, lipstick, keys, French perfume, a pocketbook, a check book, two tens (which he didn't take), and two tampons. He confessed to all that in the principal's office. He didn't confess to

grifting two of the Chiclets, a red and a white one.

"What possessed you to do this?" Principal Leland asked, dumbfounded, his hands folded in front of him. He was bald with two half bowls of black hair on either side of his head.

Nick shrugged and Mrs. Wedge sat far to the side of him. She wore black slacks, and a Danksin top, covered with a thin-crocheted jacket. Nick's parents looked at their shoes. Nick didn't tell them, but he wanted to divert attention from Mrs. Wedge to himself—if he looked weird, maybe they'd just quit picking on her. The plan worked and for six weeks, Nick took a lot of ridicule—shovings in gym lockers, two more broken thermoses, a black eye, a split lip—and then during the last week of seventh grade, after gym, in the showers, Danny Heritage popped an excruciating boner and all that negative energy and anger was displaced to him and Danny would be marked as strange throughout the rest of his public-school life.

"Well what have you got to say for yourself? Are you sorry?"

Nick nodded.

"I believe he doesn't know why he did it," Mrs. Wedge said. She looked over at Nick and he wanted to tell her why, but it wouldn't be the total truth. He also stole the purse because he had wanted to, and why he wanted to was a little unknown. But he could see forgiveness in her eyes, a murky understanding. "He, we, like *The Outsiders*, and students develop crushes on their teachers."

"But a purse," Nick's father said, his voice angry and exasperated.

"A purse is a very feminine thing," Mrs. Wedge said.

Nick felt his face flush and ears tingling. He looked at his hands. He really did like Mrs. Wedge, more than just a teacher, and he loved her even years later, and he never could tell Susan about the purse and the Chiclets.

"It's perfectly natural."

Principal Leland didn't agree. He pointed to the filing cabinets behind him. They were full of the records of the misbehaved. Now Nick would join those ranks. The Principal hoped Nick's

escapades weren't going to continue. "Three days. Suspension." He gestured back at the black cabinets behind him.

"Nothing was taken from my purse," Mrs. Wedge said in Nick's defense. "And I'm not angry, Nick. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm angry," said Nick's father, who worked for the DOT and studied road formations and gradations, and made sure that the minimum amount of illumens was being emitted by various highway lights. His life was ordered, rational, and he didn't have time for anything abnormal, and a boy stealing a woman's purse to get a charge, that was chaotic. "I didn't raise no son to go looking in women's purses."

"It's just a healthy curiosity," Mrs. Wedge said. "Seventh grade boys are curious."

"Curious," Nick's father smacked Nick on the back of the head. "That's what curious will get you. You understand me?"

Nick said nothing.

"Do you understand me?"

"Will you please, please, please just stop," Mrs. Wedge said in a sad, quiet voice "Just stop."



Nick's final scene took twelve hours and twenty-seven minutes. It was two pages long and Hall ran it once with a point of view on Swados, and then did a turn around with a point of view on Furey. The series often used multiple split screens for dramatic impact, and Hall insisted on tons of coverage shots and a whole lot of hot-head steadicam work. But twelve hours felt like only two hours. Damn, it was fast. And Nick felt alive the whole time.

He now sips Evian and the director and the rest are giving him a moment by himself, by his chair. The special effects fellas will make the background look like a nuclear dawn and the crash will be spectacular. The final scene was quick—hell, three years on *Hard Rain* felt quick, and Jessica's going to be thinking about

colleges in the fall, USC-Davis probably, and he'll be watching her films some day. She doesn't want to act, she wants to write, and the SF material she's shown him is really good. It relies less on pyrotechnics and action and more on relationships and the border crossings between human beings and machines. A question of souls.

The bottle's finished and he slinks back in his chair. His eyes are heavy and he wants to cry, but he doesn't want anyone to see him. Twenty minutes pass, and some of the crew, having observed his privacy, now approach Nick, including Paul asking for an autograph. Nick obliges, smiling. "So it looked pretty good?"

"Awesome." Paul's hair is parted in a central wave, and the upper parts of his cheeks are hard and bright, and then he tells Nick the highlight for him.

"Rick Furey, sweat splotching his forehead and hands, heads the Cessna to the desert sands, and then you confront him, and you're right in his face, bam!, and the dialogue is so Chris Swados. Something like, 'You've had a hard-on to die since your wife was killed. Well, this doesn't make you a hero. Living for your daughter does. Think of her.' Great beat change there. Rick's face registers what you're saying and then you give the best line of the show, 'Now get out of that damn chair.' I love that line. 'Get out of that damn chair.' Awesome."

The rest of crew around Nick agrees, nodding. Swados is the ultimate hero, putting Furey's family first. "What about the lollipop?" Nick asks.

"Oh, classic. Totally," says Paul.

After reluctantly sliding out of the chair, and strapping on a parachute, Rick punched Swados twice in the right shoulder and then, in a grand gesture of friendship, took the lollipop from Chris's mouth, wiped it on his own shirt and placed it in his pocket, a memento, his eyes brimming over. "That wasn't too much?" It wasn't in the script. It was purely Colin Dewar's invention.

"No. It was touching. I mean, it humanized you even more," Paul says.

Nick isn't so sure. Colin probably just won himself the goddamn Emmy. It was a brilliant moment, but it seemed to pull focus, making a Chris Swados scene into a Rick Furey one.

"Well thanks everyone." He opens another Evian. "I think I just want to be alone for awhile."

"Sure." Paul nods, his gray eyes dim with emotion, and a few pat Nick's shoulders and then move off the set. The grips shut down the lights and unplug cables and cords. The crew will be back on the soundstage tomorrow. Maybe Nick will drop in and say hello. He sits there for awhile. Mrs. Wedge left the school at the end of the year. For a long time, Nick feared the purse incident pushed her away, and he carried heavy guilt through eighth and ninth grade, but in his twenties he knew or felt that she really knew why he did it—a combination of sexual curiosity and genuine compassion for a woman that he really cared about. Maybe she eventually got a gig teaching nerdy gifted kids, the kind that could really appreciate her. Aw, hell, one can hope.

In forty-five minutes, Susan and Jessica arrive by the studio parking lot in their family Cressida. Nick doesn't say much as he approaches the car, but he can tell that Susan can tell by his shoulders and slow amble that Chris Swados has died. Jessica climbs out of the front seat. "Dad, you can sit in front," she says. She knows too.

"No sweetheart. That's okay." He sits in back and smiles awkwardly. The way his face feels—the jaw hanging loose, jutted, the lips slightly parted—makes him think he looks like an embarrassed Henry Fonda in the *Lady Eve* or *The Male Animal*.

"So—" Susan's hands clutch the top of the steering wheel. "It's eight and we haven't eaten supper. Where would you like to go?" She smells of strawberries.

Nick shrugs. He momentarily thinks about Zuppa Toscana soup, but opts for hamburgers.

"That's not good for your ticker, Daddy."

"Okay. How about low-carb pizza? Half the fat, half the cheese?"

"Pesto pizza, your favorite," Susan says. "We can afford the fat

and the cheese.”

“Pesto pizza, then.” Nick smiles feebly and looks out the window, envisioning soundstage twelve and a row of klieg lights shut down, traces of boom-tire tracks silted in the makeshift sand, and the remnants of a heavy airplane interior being carted away.