

**THE VERY NICK OF
TIME**

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NICK'S RIDICULOUS RINGTONE BURST FROM MY PHONE, SOME WEIRD PORNO-SONG WITH A BIG BASS LICK AND A GIRL GOING "WAH-WAH" THAT STARTLED ME. In the 12 seconds I sat on my bed waiting to pick up, I remembered what someone had said in rehab: when you're clean, the friends you did drugs with won't call or write. So it was with curiosity that I took the call.

"Hey, Martin," Nick said, clipped too short, like a child's bangs. "Didn't think you'd pick up, man."

"What's going on?"

"Pretty weird. Some sad news."

"What?"

"I found your uncle Jonny dead this morning in the Big J bathroom."

"You're kidding?"

"No. When I went into work and went to the bathroom, I found him there on the floor in the back stall. Pretty weird. No signs, nothing until I turned on the lights."

For a minute, I pictured legs spread and wrapped around the base of a toilet, knees nearly flat on the floor like a dog headed from compliance to submission.

"What happened?"

"Don't know. We got the police right away, and they took care of the body. It'll be on the news tonight, I bet. Suppose there will be an autopsy. He wasn't very old, was he?" Nick said.

"He's forty one... was forty one."

"Hey, do you want to get a pop or something this afternoon?"

"Any idea what happened?"

"I can take a break at two."

We used to go out at two most afternoons with an aerosol of Aqua net, the teal-colored can with metallic silver crosshatch designs that, not so ironically, looked like a web, and duck into a copse of chokecherry bushes behind the local Kmart. The growth was thick, the shade within it dappled like an Appaloosa's fine rump, and no one came there until late in July when pickers arrived in trucks and stood on their down tail gaits to milk the long strands of dark purple berries that hung in abundance in tight clusters from the bushes.

We'd cut up one of the towels Nick's sister took from the hotel where she worked and soak a piece with the spray, until, again ironically, it was tacky. I'd put the piece in my mouth first. I waited a second so I wouldn't gag on the terrycloth and so I could really concentrate and enjoy what was to come and then I'd inhale, slowly like I imagine you do with a great cigar, the best of Cuba entering and resonating inside with the first held puff. Nick would pull the towel piece from my mouth and say "abracadabra" as if he were a magician yanking a rabbit from a top hat. Then he'd announce, all big and boisterous as the wolf himself, "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your ass down" and then it seemed like he put it in his mouth. I never knew what happened after that until I ended up at home early evening for supper with my mother. I always wondered why she never smelled the astringent sweetness coming out of my mouth like a song I couldn't quit humming. But she never said a word. It was only when the school called her and the counselor said that I'd been caught in the boys' bathroom with the hairspray and some cloth and Nick---the only time we did it in school---that I had to tell her how I had been spending many afternoons. She cried so hard I thought she'd never stand up again.

Not long after that call, I went to the Pine's Treatment Center on Man Lake in Minnesota, an old resort that had been converted into a rehab site by a private foundation. I spent six weeks there, imprisoned among red pines and cedars with

lacy foliage, the water lapping in as if it could wash me clean and out as though it was luring me away. Never had such a beautiful setting sucked so much. Sometimes I sat on the deck of the main building and stare at a line of trees that led to the water, Norway pine boughs, the new growth at the end of each a needled finger flipping me off, and then I peered past them toward the trees' interior and studied the bark on the trunks, red and sort of peeling and all I could imagine was burned skin getting ready to cast itself off into the bed of salmon-colored needles shed from all the trees, rebirth I expected but never saw.

"Don't know. I'm going to have to tell mom, and maybe we'll go over to Rachel's and give her some support," I said, my voice undulating in and out of sine wave or was it a cosine wave?

"Whatever, man. But if you change your mind, give me a call. You got my number now."

I used to have Nick on speed-dial, one push away from another afternoon in the foliage, fooling ourselves into thinking we had life dicked, stink that should've only been on hair, in our mouths and on our hands, inside us holding us without letting go. All we ever talked about is how we'd get high the next time and the next, low-brow gutter strategists plotting out escapades that were supposed to make them happy. You see, the thing I never told Nick is that I felt like shit about what we'd done every night, especially because I wanted so bad to do it again the next day even though I knew it was wrong. I wasn't stupid, either; I knew we could die putting that into us and someone would find us with sticky lips and hands, scraps of stolen bath towels wadded up around us, a sorry sight those high school boys made, the dregs behind the parking lot.

I think Rachel and Jonny came to our house after dad's funeral.

I'd ducked out and sucked in some spray in the garage before most of the mourners arrived. I felt like I was going to puke after that, though I bet people dismissed my nearly impossible to hide nausea as a reaction to my dad's sudden death on the job. He was killed when he and a crew were digging up the berms to replace water mains in town and the ground caved in on him in a spot where they had a huge dirty hole. He was in a grave even before he died is what I kept thinking the day of the funeral. And though I'd vowed to myself I wouldn't do any spray that morning, that thought was so unmanageable I sneaked into the garage and did some anyway.

My mom and I didn't really keep in contact with Rachel and Jonny. There was no ill will or anything; it was just that my dad was the only thing that we thought we had in common with them. Without him, we assumed there was nothing.

My mom kept saying "dad is gone" or "Thomas is gone," always the word gone instead of dead. That pissed me off royally for a while. I took it to mean that she didn't really accept that he was dead. But after I got home from rehab, I realized that gone is the only word to describe it: big spaces of air empty. . . . spaces he used to occupy with a hearty laugh over something stupid on TV or political rants during which he proclaimed that "our economy is going tits up." His being gone was so horrible, so complete and final, that I knew I had to stop and stay clean so I wouldn't soon die, my mother left with an inability to reckon with me being gone, the volume I occupied that moved through our house as me filled up with unbearable nothing.

Nick showed up at Burger King exactly at two even though I never called him to tell him I'd meet him. He shuffled strangely toward the booth where I sat, his pants well below his waistline, the crotch nearly at his knees, and then he reached down and pulled it all up. I knew he

wasn't trying to be all *gangsta*; he'd lost weight.

"I figured you'd show," he said as he sat down, the upholstery squeaking like a balloon's belly being rubbed as he slid toward the wall. "Just like I figured you'd pick up the phone."

"Nick, listen..."

"Martin. I know. I don't want to go hang out in the bushes either. I got a kid coming, you know."

"You're joking."

"No, man I am not. Sally's pregnant, and we're getting married really soon. You'll come?"

"Of course," I said.

"She's got a good job doing the books at the potato farm her uncle owns, and I'm in the management track. Don't say it. I never thought I was management material either. But I'm doing well."

"Wanna pop? My treat," I said as I stood up.

"No. I don't drink anything but filtered water----Sally got us one of those purifiers you put on the faucet---, free trade coffee and sometimes almond milk. I know; I sort of don't believe it, either," Nick said. He leaned forward and put his chin on his elbows, crossed on the table. "But I feel so damned good, I can't even stand myself anymore."

Nick shook his head, smiled and looked up before he closed his eyes as if to dream or imagine his apparent new life, that if he could see it in his mind's eye it had to be real.

"Then I'll skip the pop, too. We can just hang out a bit."

The place was pretty quiet. A couple of men in their seventies sat at a booth near a bank of windows, each with an extra large cup in his hand, the lids at the end of the table. They took turns looking out the window, impassive to the steely clouds settling in the west, the late afternoon storm they might portend.

“Martin, I got something to tell you about your uncle,” Nick said. He straightened up, ran his hands through his hair and then closed his eyes again. But the look on his face made me think he was trying to forget something rather than invoke or conjure it up.

“I figured,” I said. Then I wondered for a moment if I really had figured or if I just realized I had figured or if I were lying to myself about having figured. People in rehab said addicts lie to themselves all the time. Every damned day our group herself leader said it.

“There was some gold spray paint and a paper sack on the floor next to him. We can't keep the shit in stock these days.”

“I figured something like that.”

“Really?”

“Remember that time we were in the bushes and just about to start when we heard sirens?”

“Scared the shit out of me.”

“Me, too,” I said. “While we were taking off, I saw Jonny hidden in the trees not far from us doing practically the same thing we were going to do. There was a spray can of something, a glass bottle, some matches...even some gold on the leaves, like they'd been burnished with frickin' fairy dust.”

“Did he see you?”

“I'm not sure. He did look up but there was so much foliage and so

many ripening berries and I was nervous; I just don't know."

"Did he ever say anything to you?"

"I never talked to him after that. You know, we were really never that close, and he never came around after my dad died."

We leaned back and looked in the direction of the men studying what lay beyond the windows. One of the teenage workers wiped a table nearby, rubbing the rag methodically across the plastic surface, whisking salt grains to the floor where they got trapped in the small troughs of gray grout between the beige ceramic tiles.

"One more thing, Martin."

"What?"

"I was going to take Jonny's stuff when I found him. I mean when I saw a body under the stall door and went into the stall to look. There was his stuff. . . . the spray paint, you know."

"Old Jonny had the Midas Touch, I guess you'd say," I said and then added, "Sorry. I shouldn't be flippant. It's just that my dad tried so hard and my uncle. . . Fuck, Nick, I don't even know what I'm talking about."

"Martin, listen. I stood there for a really long time trying to decide what to do. I thought of all the time you spent with me, how much fun we used to have, though I know you didn't really find it all that fun and I thought I've got to take this shit for Martin's sake. I really do," Nick said. He was speaking quickly, breathlessly almost.

"Nick, that would be so illegal. You shouldn't have done that?"

"I only thought about it, man. I didn't take any of it. I've got too much to lose with a kid coming and Sally. Plus we try to track the stupid gold spray paint.

What gets sold and...Napa won't even sell spray paint to minors. They have a sign up." He grew quiet.

"Hey, don't forget about the filtered water and the free trade coffee you and Sally have."

He half-laughed, more air than sound.

"I just couldn't do it. But I wanted to so much. And I just had to tell you that. I'm sorry."

"Nick, there's nothing to be sorry for. Absolutely nothing."

We stared at one another. I realized that in all the time I'd spent with Nick I'd never noticed a scar just above his left eye, the size of a child's thumb, lighter than the rest of his skin, a small notch. My dad had a similar scar on his wrist from, he said, a dog bite. Ironically, I have no visible scars...at least, not yet.