LINE MAGIC

by Kris Faatz

Prologue

Picture this:

You're a kid, so little that the world is enormous. Your mom's and dad's faces float above you like balloons. Tabletops are too high to see, so you stretch up your fingertips to reach for their mysteries. Chair seats are the peaks of hills.

Everything is touch and color and shape, shape and touch and color. You crawl on a rug, as broad as an ocean, and feel every nub and tuft against your chubby palms. You pull yourself up on your still-wobbly feet and run your fingers along a wall. So slick and smooth! The rug is *green,* the wall is *white*: somebody tells you this, or you breathe it in, and the words fill your whole body because now you *know* white and green, and you will keep them forever.

I remember this, you see. For me it was almost a hundred years ago, but I still remember.

One day you learn that your dinner plate is a *circle* and your napkin is a *square.* Next thing you know, there are squares and circles everywhere you look. The joy of them bubbles up in you until you laugh out loud. When you're hungry, and your mom pours you a cup of milk, and you pick it up in both hands and take a big swallow, and it slides down into you and feels so good in your stomach: shapes and colors make you feel the same.

Soon you know not just circles and squares, but triangles and ovals and diamonds. You know color-words you can chew on: *Scarlet. Peach. Daffodil.* And then, one day, somebody puts a pencil in your hand. Somebody's big strong fingers wrap around yours and guide the pencil point across a piece of paper. One line. Another. Two more. You look down at your very own square that you drew.

Your own square. Can you picture it? Can you feel what it means?

My father put that pencil in my hand and showed me how to use it, the same way he taught me all the words for the things I saw. You'll hear more about him. Not just yet.

You draw another square, this time by yourself. The pencil wiggles and you can't make the lines straight, but you try again, and you keep trying. All this time you are getting bigger, getting older. One day you draw a perfect square, a perfect triangle. Then you draw trapezoids and hexagons. You look outside a window – you can draw that too, now – and trace the individual shapes of leaves on a branch. When you hold the drawing up, it's a mirror of what you see outside.

Maybe you're thinking, *Are we still talking about a kid here? He must be pretty talented.* You're right. I was six then, what they call "precocious." But you haven't heard the best part yet.

One day you see something that doesn't look right. For now, let's say it's something simple, like an apple. (It wasn't, but I'm an old man. I'll tell my stories how I want.) It's a funny-shaped apple, lopsided maybe, as if half of it got dipped in shrink juice. You look at it and think, *That doesn't look good at all. I could draw it better.*

As you think this, you feel something shift inside you. Remember, you're still a kid: you don't have the words for exactly what you feel. Later, as an adult, you might think something like, *a car getting into gear.*

You sit down with a piece of paper and your pencil and the apple on the table in front of you. You start to draw, except now you're drawing the apple the way it *should* look. Round and smooth with a perfect stem that goes straight down the middle. Your eyes move back and forth from the apple to the paper.

By the time you finish, there are *two* perfect apples. One on your paper, and one on the table.

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Now you're probably thinking, *This old guy is senile or crazy or both.* Right? I'd think that too, if I were you. But keep listening.

The real apple, the one you changed by drawing it, doesn't stay perfect for long. Maybe an hour or so later, it slumps back into its lopsided shape. That disappoints you. (More than I can say, because it wasn't just an apple I drew that day. But that's for another time.) Still, you *did* make it perfect. Now you know you can do something extraordinary when you pick up your pencil.

You can make magic.

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Why am I telling this? Mostly because of my daughter. Georgia – she goes by Jo – is nearly seventy now, and as determined and sure of herself as she was at age three, when she told me I was going to teach her how to draw. She doesn't need my help to do that anymore, or anybody's help, but these days she says, "Dad, you're not going to live forever."

At my age, darling, you think I need the reminder? But she has a point. She says I need to tell the story now, because I'm the only one left who remembers it all. Her hair is mostly silver, and maybe someday will turn as white as mine, but when I look at her, I still see the little brown-haired flower who climbed into my lap and put a pencil in my hand. "Now, Daddy. Please."

She gets the same curve to her eyebrow, too, and the same shadow of a dimple, that her mother used to get when she was scolding me and trying not to laugh. I can't believe how long it's been since I last heard Justine's laugh. When Jo gives me that look, I fold like a no-luck poker player.

Yesterday, she brought over this new laptop computer, calling it an early birthday present. (Early is right: it's June, and my birthday is in November.) She said, "Now, let's make sure it works, Dad. Just open up a new document and type a little." You can bet she wasn't just checking that she'd gotten her money's worth on a fancy machine thin enough to use for a placemat. And you can guess how much choice I had about what to do next.

Now it's early morning, barely light out. We old folks, you know, tend to get up with the dawn. I always like to know that I'm around for another sunrise. My house is quiet, except for the

creaks and taps in the old walls and floorboards, but I can hear the city waking up outside. Pretty soon, it'll be another muggy Philadelphia summer day, like so many I remember.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table where I used to draw, and where I taught Jo all those years ago. She isn't here now to watch me tap away on this keyboard, but if I know her, the first thing she'll ask when she visits this afternoon will be, "Did you get a chance to use the laptop? How do you like it?" No doubt she'll tell her kids to ask the same too, next time they stop by. She doesn't need to worry too much. She got me started on this, and I've always been stubborn when I start a thing.

So now I'll take us back seventy-some years. If you're as old as I am, or anywhere near it, you might know how it feels to step into the person you used to be before time caught up with you. We old people say *It could have been yesterday.* In your mind, you go back in time, and then you look down at your age-spotted hands, or feel how your bones drag against your muscles, and for one heartbeat you know you could shed this tired body like a coat. Your real self is no age at all.

By the way, my name is Nicky True, so you know what you're about to hear is a true story. At my age, you can get away with jokes like that.

Chapter 1

In early March of 1945, I got a telegram from my brother Charley. It arrived at my apartment in Los Angeles, a tiny slip of paper, light enough to blow away on a breath. It was going to unravel my life.

It was a Tuesday night. At the movie studio where I worked, we had wrapped our shoot for the day even later than usual. Paragon Films wasn't one of the Big Eight studios, as they called themselves, but it was no coincidence that our little operation's name sounded an awful lot like the name of one of the powerhouses still making movies today. In 1945, Paragon was young and hungry. Its exec, Jonah Eberly, wanted to wring every drop of sweat he could out of his actors and crew, to get our product out before anybody could beat us to the punch.

This particular night, we got through sometime after ten. The moment the cameras stopped clickety-whirring, Sara Fontaine, our new leading lady, brushed her co-star aside and came to find me in the wings. "I'd like to ride home with you, Nick."

Her co-star was Wilson Turner, one of the many square-jawed Clark Gable would-bes who got their feet in any Hollywood doors they could find and kept them there good and hard. Nobody but Sara herself could have told why she'd decided, a few weeks earlier, to ignore his handsome mug in favor of mine, which was nothing special.

I had packed up my sketchbook and pencils, but hadn't yet pulled myself up out of the chair I used for every shoot. I was never in front of the camera, not for an instant, but those fourteen-hour days still left me pretty wrung out. "I might not be much company tonight," I apologized to Sara. The usual pinprick headache had started between my eyes, so I took off my glasses to pinch the bridge of my nose. "I thought maybe I'd just grab a peanut butter sandwich and go to bed."

She stood in front of my chair, straight and slim as a candle in the white nurse's outfit she'd worn for the sequence. "Please let me come to your place, just for a little bit." Her eyes were the exact color of new leaves in spring, and her cap gleamed against her dark hair. "I never get to see you."

We saw each other every day on set, of course, but that didn't count because we were working. Sara wanted more. She had picked me out, for reasons best known to herself, and set about claiming me with the same straightforward focus she brought to owning the roles she played.

I liked her. Trouble was, I wore a good heavy shield around myself. Back then, you see, Nick True wasn't a guy who formed attachments. If he had, he'd have had to talk about home, family, those usual things people trade news about.

Sara had a particular way of looking at me. She couldn't push my shield away, but she almost – almost – put a hairline crack in it. That's why, that night, we got on the tram together. It was a shuddery ride along the fringe of Hollywood back to my place. The warm early-spring darkness smelled and tasted of summer. I'd loved that about California since the moment I'd landed there, fresh off the train from Pennsylvania.

I still lived in the same apartment I'd found back then. The oldish brick building, and the nondescript side street it stood on, could have come straight out of Anywhere, USA. Paragon paid me more than decently for my work – tell you more about that later – and after almost three years with them, I could have afforded to live in one of the big candy-colored places, real Tinseltown, with walls of windows and courtyards spiked with palm trees. I lived alone, though, and didn't much care what the surroundings looked like. Sara and I stopped in the lobby for my mail, which I stuffed in the breast pocket of my seersucker jacket.

We went up the elevator to the top floor. In my apartment, Sara kicked off her high heels by the door and hung her long coat on the back of one of my two kitchen chairs. The apartment was a

single room, small but bright, with a high counter that divided the narrow galley kitchen from the rest of the living space. Prints by some of my favorite artists hung on the walls: Peter Paul Rubens, Thomas Hart Benton, Georgia O'Keeffe.

Those prints were my only nod to what I'd once hoped to be. If Sara had known that, they'd have given her a glimpse behind my shield – but she didn't know.

The icebox lid clanked as she pulled it back. "Nick, I honestly think you're the only person in L.A. who doesn't stock booze."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm teasing." She pulled out a bottle of ginger ale and came to stand close to me. Drops of water gleamed on the glass and on her fingertips. "I think sobriety is part of your charm."

When Jonah had brought her on, back in December, he'd said she was going to Put Paragon on the Map. It wasn't the first time we'd heard such a thing, and she wasn't a Hedy LaMarr or a Greta Garbo, but her eyes surely had a way of catching you. Once caught, you took in the curves of her cheeks, the way her mouth hinted at a smile, and they pressed themselves on your memory. She barely needed my behind-the-scenes sketchbook.

I said, "Charm, is it?" When she looked at me that way…well, to tell the truth, I'd have liked to break the spell if I could. And yet I didn't quite want to, either. "I'm glad to hear I've got some of that," I said.

"You know you do." She took a sip of ginger ale and tilted her head, studying me. "Did I tell you, Lily said I should watch myself with you?"

Lily MacLeish was another Paragon actress who had joined the studio around the same time I had. She and I had dated a little, early on, until she had run into my shield too. "You always listen," she'd complained once, "but I can never get you to talk. You're a nice guy, Nick, but somehow I feel like you're not really here."

Now Sara went on, "I couldn't imagine why she'd say that, when you're such a gentleman, but I see her point." She reached up to take hold of my lapel. "Still waters run deep."

Her hand on my coat reminded me of the mail in my pocket and gave me an excuse to step back. "I'm sorry." I reached for the envelopes. "I almost forgot about these." When I dropped them on the counter, the telegram lay on top, thin and eggshell-colored with my address typed in bold.

Telegrams cost a good bit to send. You used them when you had to get hold of someone and, for one reason or another, a long-distance phone call was out of the question. When I saw it there, the air seemed to go solid around me.

Sara saw it too. "What's that?"

Those were the war years, of course, when telegrams meant more than ever. I didn't have anyone sending me news from overseas, but nonetheless, I had a pretty good idea what this was about. I wished Sara wasn't standing there watching me. I wished I could turn off the light and hide. Most of all, I wished the telegram would turn into dust and blow away.

My hands shook as I ripped the envelope open. The single line of text jumped out at me like a shout.

NICKY PLEASE COME HOME MOM WORSE LOVE C

No stops in it, as if the sender'd had to force the words out in one gasp. I had known this was coming, but for a while, I had let myself pretend it wasn't. Fog seemed to curl out of the corners of the apartment and close in around me.

"Nick?" Sara said. "What is it?"

I didn't want to tell her. The telegram meant home had reached out to drag me back, after three years. After everything I had done to try to get away.

"It's from my brother, Charley." My voice sounded steadier than I'd hoped. I made myself hold the slip of paper out to her. "Our mom isn't doing well."

"Oh, no." Sara took in the line of type. "Is she sick?"

From the sound of it, she might not make it to her fiftieth birthday in the fall. The doctors had found masses in her lungs a few months earlier. She had resisted surgery and all the treatments that, to be sure, sounded scary as hell, but might have given her a chance. Anyone who knew her would have expected nothing else. My brother Charley, sixteen years old, lived alone with her now, trying to keep things going with as much help as neighbor ladies could give. He couldn't do it much longer.

I sketched the situation for Sara. "Oh," she said. "I'm so sorry." She put her hand on my arm. "Listen, I won't stay now. You'll have things to do." She set the unfinished ginger ale on the counter and refused my offer to see her back to her place. "You rest and do what you need to." At the door, she said, "Your brother calls you Nicky?"

Everyone at home had always called me that. I had shed the old name when I came west, thinking that would help me shed everything else. "He does," I managed.

Sara smiled. "I think it's sweet." She leaned in to kiss me. "Good night."

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The next morning, I went to the telegraph office first thing and sent a message back to Charley. I could have tried to call him at home, the house where he and I had been born, but you might as well call a spade a spade: I was scared. I didn't want to hear his voice on the other end of the phone. It would drag me back there faster than I had to go already.

Instead I wrote back, FIXING THINGS HERE WILL FLY FRIDAY, and my best guess at what time I would land at the Philadelphia airport, assuming I could sort out tickets. Then I went to Paragon to meet with my boss before the day's shoot began.

Jonah Eberly was one of the most ambitious men I've ever known. I've always thought it was a shame he never managed to turn Paragon into the kind of place he imagined back in those

days, when it was a scrappy startup and I was, not to sound too mysterious about it, his secret weapon.

All of us who worked for the studio dressed well; the company had an "image," you can bet, so no matter how many hours we sweated on set each day, all of us men came back to work the next day in fresh-pressed shirts and ties, and the women in skirts and blouses so crisp they rustled like autumn leaves. Jonah Eberly outdid us all. You never saw him in anything but a three-piece suit, silver-gray linen for preference, and a matching broad-brimmed fedora. Los Angeles got good and warm even in early spring, so he sweated as much as any of us. When he took the hat off and set it on the designated corner of his wide desk, his bald bulldog head gleamed as if he'd given it a polish.

"Nick," he said, when I came in. "What can I do for you?"

When I had first arrived in Hollywood, back in the spring of 1942, he had recognized what I could offer his studio and snapped it up the way a fox snaps up a stray chick. That had been lucky for me, a desperate kid who had cut himself loose from his whole world and hopped on a train with barely a shred of a plan.

I didn't sit down now, although I did take off my own hat, a less impressive cotton fedora. "I have some family trouble, sir. I need to go back to Philadelphia for a while."

He wasn't any too glad to hear that. We were still in mid-production on one of the many red-white-and-blue pictures that hauled in the crowds during the war years. You know the kind: they whooped up our fearless boys overseas and our true and lovely girls back home, and cast the Germans or Japanese as paper villains long on malice and short on brains.

Now you need to know what I did in the movies. During the shoots, my job was to make sure everything looked exactly the way the producers wanted. My sketchbook and I could fix anything, from a detail on a costume to a flaw in a piece of scenery to the shape of the leading lady's

face. Jonah wanted the right image in every can of magic Paragon opened up and splashed on the silver screen. He used me and my magic, the real stuff that happened when I drew, to get it.

"Philadelphia?" he said. He always kept a box of fat Cuban cigars on his desk. Rumor had it he'd used to chew tobacco, but he'd trained himself out of it when he started up Paragon and needed a bankroll. Money men wouldn't hand the goods over to someone who chawed and spat like a country cousin. Now Jonah took out a cigar and sliced the end off with his bone-handled knife.

I explained about my mother and Charley. When I finished, Jonah drew long and hard on the cigar. He didn't need to tell me that by taking time away right now, I was leaving our cast and crew in a jam. Filming had to go ahead with or without me, which meant that about halfway through the finished product, the magic would disappear.

It flashed through my head that he might say I couldn't go, or at least not until the shoot ended. The phone call I would have to make then unspooled in my imagination. *Charley, I'm so sorry, my boss says…* Sorry, was it? I could already taste the relief.

"Okay." Jonah tapped the cigar on his pewter ashtray. "Go on out there now and take care of things. Family's important." The smoke made a haze in the air. "But listen, Nick, keep me posted what's happening, and come back as quick as you can. You know we need you."

"Yes, sir. I will."

That afternoon, during a break from shooting, I set up the flight to Philly. The next couple of days went past much too quickly. Sara came over again on Thursday night and helped me pack. "Are you sure that's enough?" she said, looking at the little pile of clothes in my grip. "You don't know how long you'll be away, do you?"

I didn't. And I couldn't make myself face the idea that I might be going back to Philadelphia to wait out the end of my mother's life. "For now, I just need to see what's going on," I said. "Then

I'll figure out what to do." Besides, I told myself, whatever happened, I couldn't stay out there too long. My life was here.

Friday afternoon, when the plane touched down in Philly, I stepped onto the tarmac and into raw, gray weather that clawed at my hands and bit into my sinuses. Hanging onto my grip, fumbling to turn up the collar of my trench coat, I felt to my bones how long it had been since I'd last been here. I had forgotten how winters hung on. The air smelled of asphalt and exhaust. The wind pushed at me as if it wanted to shove me back onto the plane.

I'd decided during the flight that I would get a cab and go to Charley's school first. He would still be there at this time of day, unless our mother had needed him to stay home with her, so I'd be able to pick him up and we would go back to the house together. I wasn't walking into that place without him.

The main airport building stood squat and gray against the gray sky. I started across the tarmac toward it, pushing back against the wind, and had gone only a few steps when I heard a shout. "Nicky! Hey, Nicky!"

The name felt like a slap, but then I saw him hustling toward me, my brother Charley, in a thin jacket with no hat or gloves. His bangs fell across his forehead. His smile landed on me like the sun coming out.

He was moving as fast as he could, but you see, he couldn't run. His left foot, in its thick shoe, was straight and normal. His right foot, stuffed into a heavy sock, was twisted in and under, as if it wanted to hide. That's why he held onto a heavy wooden cane.

He couldn't run, so I did. I took off toward him across the tarmac with my grip banging against my legs. When I got to him, he let go of the cane and I dropped my grip and we caught hold of each other.

I hadn't seen him since I had left Philly. Back then, he'd been a still-skinny thirteen-year-old, short and scrawny for his age. From our rare phone calls since, I knew how his voice had changed, but I hadn't seen how he had shot up and bulked out, his shoulders and upper arms especially. No doubt that was from the lifetime of lugging his bad foot around. If he'd had two good feet to balance on, he would have stood taller than me now. As it was, we were eye to eye, the same gray-green eyes except that he didn't need glasses, and the same thick, straight, reddish-brown hair we had gotten from our father.

He held me tight. "I'm glad you're home."

The city itself still bit at me as if it wanted to spit me back to California. Less than ten minutes off the plane, I already ached for the place I'd left. But I didn't know how I could have gone so long without seeing my little brother.

I pulled back to look at him, keeping my hands on his shoulders so he wouldn't have to reach for the cane. "You grew, kid!" My eyes smarted and I blinked. "When'd you get so big?"

"Nicky." He laughed. "You've been gone a while."

A while. Like a handful of frames in a reel, I remembered him hanging onto me the night before I got on the train. *You have to tell me all about California.* His jaw set, his throat working to swallow his tears as if I wouldn't hear them. *Tell me where you live, and what you do, and everything, so I can pretend I'm there too.*

In the time since, I had told him plenty in our letters and calls, but I had never managed to ask him to call me Nick. I certainly couldn't tell him I still wouldn't be here now if I'd had a choice. I reached down for the cane and handed it back to him. Together, we made our slow way through the airport building to the cab fleet parked out front.

Do you remember how I told you about the apples, and that first time I learned what I could do with my drawing? I said it wasn't really an apple I drew that day. Now, if I tell you that I was

eight years old then, and my little brother had just been born, perfect in every way except for that right foot: maybe then you'll know what really happened.

We got into the first cab in line. Charley gave the driver our mother's address. As we made our way out of the jammed parking lot, threading between cars and stopping to let hustling pedestrians past, Charley said, "Hey, don't tell Mom I cut school, okay? I was supposed to stay all day, but I had to come meet you."

He had the same grin, the little-kid one that used to egg me on to prank our parents, back when our father was alive. When we were about to eat dinner: *make Daddy's fork look funny.* I'd take out a piece of paper and draw Dad's fork with a curlicue handle or the tines sticking out every which way. He would come to the table and glare at the real fork, twisted all out of shape, as if he had never seen such a trick before. *Am I raising boys or monkeys?* His Irish lilt made it sound like *byes*, and he would hold up the fork as if it were a giant bug that had landed on his plate, and Charley would laugh and laugh until you'd have thought he would bust himself. Dad would try to frown at me, but his eyes said *Look what you can do, son, isn't that something!* Then he would start laughing too, and I'd join in, and the three of us would carry on until Mary Anna, my mother, came in with her mouth set, and told me to sit back down with my pencil and put that fork right.

Now, in the back seat of the cab, gladness bloomed in me to know that Charley could still grin like that. "I won't tell her you cut school," I promised. "But what classes did you miss?" Charley loved math and physics. I'd be sorry if he'd cut something good.

"Just Latin. It's boring anyway." Then his smile faded. "Tell you the truth, Nicky, Mom might not talk to you much. Lately she's been sleeping a lot."

By now, the driver had gotten us clear of the airport and headed into the city. Traffic was moving pretty smoothly. "Sleeping?" I said.

"Yeah. Couple of weeks ago, Doc Sanders gave her stuff for pain. Morphine."

Doctor Sanders had brought Charley and me both into the world. When our mother got sick, he had tried to convince her to go to Pennsylvania Hospital and let the experts there help her. Now he was trying to keep her comfortable as long as he could. "And she takes it?" I said.

"She has to." Charley's fingers twisted together in his lap. "If she doesn't, she kind of can't stand it."

Then I knew it was real. I had believed Charley's telegram, but it's one thing to hear your parent is dying, and it's another to feel the knowledge sink into you. All her life, our mother had shied away from medicines and "meddling." Now she was taking the stuff you took when you didn't want to feel anymore.

I looked at my brother's bent head. Now I could see past the changes in him, his new height and face, to the boy I remembered. He dressed the same way he used to: jeans, going a tad frayed at the hems, and a blocky cable-knit sweater that looked like a bigger copy of one he'd worn three years ago. He'd always been neater with his hair than I was, parting it carefully and combing it smooth. Now I sat here in my Los Angeles threads and the trench coat that made me look like a mystery flick gumshoe, and remembered how Charley and I had dressed alike when we were boys. We hadn't had much choice: most of the time he'd had my hand-me-downs, because we never had much money. He'd used to tag after me everywhere. I'd always kept an eye out for him, slowed down when he needed a chance to catch up.

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, kid." For all the time he had been here alone, watching our mother fade.

He looked up. "You're home now. That's pretty good."

Our father's eyes had looked exactly that way when he smiled. Seeing it now, I wanted to shut my own eyes as tight as I could.

We crossed over the Schuylkill River, a stretch of fast-moving steel-gray water, and into Center City proper. Philadelphia isn't so much a single city as a web of neighborhoods. The neighborhood Charley and I had grown up in, Elmcroft in east Philly, between the Schuylkill and the Delaware, was a different world from Center City with its elegant storefronts and nineteenth-century townhouses. Elmcroft has been gentrified and upscaled since, but in those days, it was still gritty and hardscrabble.

No candy-colored apartment buildings here, no palm trees or hibiscus or fuchsia glowing with magenta blooms. I knew every one of Elmcroft's narrow streets, the shabby corner stores, the rows of little blocky houses and the faded awnings. Yellow ribbons, some draggled from years of service, fluttered from lampposts. Every house and shop sported an American flag. Some were full-size, hung from poles or draping from windows, and some were miniature, tied to mailbox posts or stuck into the ground next to front steps. Some houses had stars in the windows: silver for wounded soldiers, gold for those who had died.

Los Angeles had no fewer badges of the war, but they felt different to me here. In the movie business, we held onto the idea that we were helping the US win the fight because our Hollywood magic kept everyone's spirits up. Here in Philly, I couldn't hide behind my job. I was a kid who had tried to enlist and gotten turned down. Another part of the mess I had wanted to leave behind.

The cab turned down Lawrence Street, where our parents' house stood. I held onto my grip so tight its handle dug into my palms.

This street looked just like all the others in the neighborhood, tight and cramped, the brick houses shoulder-to-shoulder with identical tiny front yards that held only brown winter grass now. It would be hard to grow victory gardens here; you could squeeze one or two tomato plants in, at most, or a couple of clumps of beans. I knew every square of the sidewalk. Here I had played jacks

and marbles with the neighborhood kids, and watched the hopscotch games with Charley, and learned to use my fists the first time a kid called my brother a gimp.

The taxi pulled up at the curb in the middle of the block, in front of our mother's house. The house looked just like all the others too. The same boxy build and sloping gray roof, two tiny windows on the front, three steps leading to a porch wide enough to stand on, and a plain black front door with a brass knob and knocker. I had seen a couple of silver stars in front windows as we came down the street, and yellow ribbons on all the door knockers. Jake Satterfield, my old schoolmate, was in the Air Force, and our friend George Herskowitz was in the Navy. My mother's house had a yellow ribbon too, but no stars of course, since neither of her boys could serve.

Three years since I had last been here. I stepped out of the taxi, clutching my grip. *You can handle this,* I told myself. *You're Nick True, you're an artist in Hollywood, and you'll be back there before you know it.*

I paid the driver while Charley got out. The two of us went up the steps together. Charley undid the lock and pushed the door open, and in that instant, the past caught hold of me like a hand around my throat.

If Dad had been here. He wasn't, he never would be again, but for that one instant I imagined his quick footsteps coming down the hall and saw his face again, his red-brown hair frosted with silver, the lines at the corners of his eyes. I saw the way his eyes would look when he realized I had come home. *Nicky, boy, what took you so long?* His hand, hard and rough from years of work, gripping mine to pull me into a hug. The warm scents of Jameson and cigarettes wrapping around me. *Get yourself in here. Take off your coat and stay awhile.*

For the space of a breath, or a lot less, it was real. Then the picture disappeared. My invisible shield creaked and shivered under the pain.

If Dad had been here, everything would have been different. For a start, I wouldn't have gone to California at all.

Charley led the way into the house. I followed. For three years, I had tried to hide from the past. Now it seeped out of the walls and floorboards to meet me.

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In the master bedroom on the first floor, our mother lay on her side in the old bed she had shared with Dad. Her body was curled like a question mark under the faded quilt she had pieced before she got married. Her hair, still dark and curly, straggled like spilled ink over her cheek and down her neck. On the wall above her head, the old wooden crucifix hung, with her black rosary beads strung around the white figure on the cross.

The room was dark and stuffy, the shades drawn over the single window. The house had always had a strong smell of camphor, from the moth powder my mother kept in closets and bureaus, but now that smell blended with unwashed sheets, unwashed skin, and a sickly tang of mildew. I swallowed and tasted something sour at the back of my throat.

Charley whispered, "She usually wakes up for a little bit around dinnertime, sometimes later. I try to get her to eat."

He was leaning against the open door now, balancing between it and his cane, but the narrow chair by the bed told me where he spent most of his time when he was in this room. He sat there by the hour, I knew, watching her slow breathing, with the dingy, musty house silent around him.

I pulled my trench coat closer around me, as if it had been made of sheet metal instead of gabardine. The chair by the bed creaked under me when I sat down.

"Mom."

No response. I hadn't expected one. Her left hand lay on the pillow, the gold wedding band clunky-looking on her thin finger. I reached out and put my hand over hers. Her fingers were cold.

Anger unfurled in my stomach. How long had she already been here in this bed, holding on, not getting better, using up Charley's strength in watching over her? I held onto the anger with both hands, like a weapon. Back in the hall, I told Charley, "We've got to have more help here."

My voice sounded too harsh. Charley's eyes widened. "I told you, Mrs. O'Dell brings us meals, and Mrs. Franklin comes over sometimes and helps clean, and..."

It sounded like an apology. I waved it away. Yes, he'd told me about the neighbors, and I had been much too willing to believe he had all the help he needed. My brother, with his bad foot, waiting on a woman who couldn't do a thing for herself anymore.

It's not you I'm mad at, it's me. I couldn't say it out loud. "We're getting a girl, or something. A maid."

Charley's mouth opened in shock. "Nicky, that's too much money."

"I can pay."

I headed for the phone in the kitchen. Charley followed, his cane tapping on the worn floorboards. Eyeing myself from the outside, I thought, *look at you, showing up and ordering your brother around as if you didn't run away. Acting like it's your mother's fault she got sick. You're some kind of jerk, you know that?*

The kitchen felt dingy too, dirty plates piled in the sink, a smell of stale food. There was another smell I didn't recognize at first, nose-burningly sharp. As I thumped the phone book open on the counter and started flipping through it, something big and dark leapt out of nowhere and landed next to me.

Charley said, "Titus!"

It was a cat. A big black cat with a patch of white on its throat like a bib. It looked up at me, its yellow eyes wide and calm, and stretched its neck out to sniff my fingers. A low rumble started in its throat.

"You didn't tell me about this," I said.

"He's not really mine." Charley came over and gave the cat a gentle push. It jumped down and landed on the floor with barely a sound. "He showed up on the porch a couple weeks ago, and he looked so skinny I felt bad for him." He bent down and stroked the cat's back as it wound itself around his legs. "So I gave him some food."

"And a name."

"Yeah. It's Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus*. We read it in school last year."

The cat certainly wasn't skinny anymore. It – he – also didn't look as if he planned to go anywhere else. "I guess he does kind of live here," Charley admitted. "He has a litter box and everything." That explained the ammonia smell. "I didn't tell Mom."

"Sounds fair."

The kitchen wallpaper's russet apples and sage-green pears each seemed to have eyes that followed me. My mother and I had hung that paper together when I was in high school. We'd measured and cut, painted on the paste, smoothed the paper onto the walls, careful to line the strips up exactly and leave no bubbles underneath. We'd been proud of the finished job. It was one of the few times I could remember us laughing together.

The phone sat on its old table by the icebox. I picked up the receiver, concentrating on the whir of the dial as it spun. The first two agencies I called didn't have space for new clients, but the third told me they could send a girl on Monday morning. "She's colored," the woman on the phone said. "Will that be acceptable?"

I didn't see why it would matter. "As long as she can clean."

The woman assured me that the girl, Minna Davis, was a fine worker. We scheduled for her to come three mornings a week and I agreed to her wages, which were lower than I'd braced for. When I hung up, Charley said, "Look, Nicky, you don't need to do that. I know things don't look great now, but I can do more."

He was still worried about the money. "Kid, you've got plenty on your plate as it is." For an instant I wanted to reach out and ruffle his hair, the way I used to when he was little, but he was so tall now. "We can both use the help. Tell you what, though, let's fix this room up some." Anything was better than standing still.

I took off my coat and draped it over my old seat at the kitchen table. Charley eyed me up and down. "You don't want to do chores in those clothes, do you?"

My grip had a pair of jeans and a couple of T-shirts in it, but if I wanted to unpack and change, I'd have to go upstairs to my old bedroom. "It's fine." I rolled up my sleeves. "These are my work clothes, you know."

"Yeah." He pushed his sleeves up too and turned on the sink. As he reached for the box of soap flakes and dumped some in, he gave me a sideways look. The corner of his mouth twitched up.

"What?"

"Nothing." Then he turned to look me in the face and couldn't keep himself from grinning. "It's just, we knew you were doing fine for yourself out there, and all, and you look like it. You never used to dress like a swell."

Something sharp twisted in my chest. That was how he saw me? The kid who'd grown up in this house had been no kind of swell. But I wasn't that kid anymore, was I.

We did the dishes together, Charley washing, leaning against the sink, and me drying and putting away, the way we used to when we were kids. When we finished that, I wiped down the

counters and swept the floor. Charley scooped out the litter box, in its corner by the back door. The cat, Titus, curled up in Charley's chair at the kitchen table and watched us both with his yellow eyes.

While we worked, we talked. It felt a little easier when we both had reason to keep our hands busy. I knew Charley had to get used to me again, the same way I needed to get used to him. He told me how Doc Sanders visited every day and sometimes stayed with our mother a while when Charley was at school. "He said when it was time to send you that telegram. We knew you'd want to be here when…"

His voice trailed off. I was wiping the table down, and he had his back to me, scrubbing out the empty sink. *When she dies.*

Back in my safe little place in Los Angeles, only a day ago, I hadn't wanted to face that. Now I had to. I would be here with him for as long as our mother held on.

I said, "I'm glad you did."

He couldn't know how I'd really felt. He glanced at me over his shoulder and tried for a smile. In it, I saw the tiny boy who'd fought to walk in spite of his twisted foot, trying and falling and trying again. I'd used to let him hang onto my hands for balance before he got his first little crutch, and I'd scooped him off his feet and swung him around to make him laugh.

Then you went off and left. He still needed you.

Charley emptied the dustpan into the garbage bin. I wrung the dishrag I'd used out at the sink, trying to wring the thought out with it. *He was thirteen then*, I told myself. *Old enough to handle it.*

Is that right? He'd just lost Dad too.

With that, I seemed to see Dad again, standing in the corner beside the basement steps. He had his arms folded and his sleeves rolled up, the way they had been the one and only time he gave me a whipping. *What happened to you, Nicky?* No smile in those eyes now. *You went off and left, all right. California, the movie business, why did you do that? Why didn't you do what you planned?*

The floor seemed to tilt under my feet. *You know why, Dad. I left because you died.*

Charley turned on the lamp over the table. "Hey, looks pretty good in here now."

"Yeah. Sure does."

"You hungry? We've got leftover casserole. Broccoli and spinach. Mrs. O'Dell brought it over the other day."

"Sounds good."

While the casserole was warming in the oven, Charley said, "Can I ask you a favor?"

It took me a second to realize what was odd about the look on his face. He had never been shy with me before. "Of course, kid. What is it?"

"Would you draw for me?"

He had always loved the magic. He hadn't seen it in all this time. "Why, you bet I will." We were standing side by side next to the oven, and I was a hair taller, because Charley was leaning on the counter. "Did you think I'd say no?"

"Maybe. 'Cause you get paid for it these days."

He was joking, and I laughed. It felt like a long time since I'd done that. The two of us sat at the table, in the seats we'd used as kids, and Titus watched us from the floor as I took a pencil and paper and did the trick for its best audience.

There wasn't time to do much, since the casserole got hot enough to eat in only a few minutes. But I got a knife out of the silverware drawer and drew it on the paper with a flat blade that opened into a triangle, and as my eyes went back and forth from the drawing to the real knife on the table, its blade flattened and widened until it reflected the whole bulb of the ceiling lamp. Then I put tines on the blade in the drawing, and the knife on the table had tines too, like a miniature garden rake.

Charley picked it up and ran the "rake" along his palm. His grin looked wide enough to lift the top of his head right off.

"I've missed this, Nicky." He looked up at me. His eyes were so bright with delight that, for one heartbeat, I actually was glad to be home. "I've missed it a lot."

While we ate, we talked about simple things. We were eight years apart, but we had always felt closer than that, not least because Charley was always older than the calendar said. He thought into things, maybe because he never could rush into anything on his feet. Now he told me about physics class, his favorite, and how the last test was "so easy, I scored a hundred and four," and how the class was starting a new unit on light. "I bet you'd like it. It's about why we see colors the way we do."

His talk flowed over and around me. Every word told me that he felt easy with me again, the way he'd always used to. That was a good thing. Soon – another thought I hadn't wanted to face yesterday – much too soon, I would be his only family.

When the time came, of course, we would go back to California together. Listening to Charley, watching him, I thought how he would like Los Angeles. Just wait, I thought, until he saw the colors out there, and the way the sun made even the sidewalks glitter. I would need to find a bigger apartment, but that wouldn't be hard. It would be all the easier to afford because I wouldn't be sending part of my wages back home anymore, the way I had since I'd started at Paragon.

A kid as smart as my brother deserved something else, too. He got up to refill his plate, and when he came back to the table, I said it out loud. "Charley, you think about college at all?"

His fork stopped on the way to his mouth. "College?"

"Sure." We had talked about the subject before, back when Dad was alive and everything was going to be different. "You should think about it," I said, "if you want." He was a junior in high school. He had plenty of time to decide what he wanted.

He lowered his fork, still full, back down to his plate. His face looked wide open, a little kid seeing a Christmas tree for the first time, not wanting to blink in case it disappeared. "Do you really think I could go?"

Even Titus probably saw he wanted to. "Of course you could," I said. "Sounds like you've got the grades for it, no trouble."

He looked down at his plate. "Maybe it would be hard," he said. "For me. Since I'm..."

His cane leaned against the edge of the table. He touched it, quick and light. Neither of us ever used the word *crippled*, but it hung in the air right then.

Our mother had never liked doctors or hospitals. When Charley was little, when it might have been easy or at least easier, she had refused to let anyone try to correct his foot. I took a long swallow from my water glass to wash my anger away. "You get around fine here," I said. "We could figure it out."

"It would be expensive, right?"

"Let me worry about that."

He reached across the table to squeeze my hand. "Hey, did I tell you I'm glad you're home?"

We finished eating and cleaned up. The last plate had barely gone into the cabinet when I started yawning. Charley saw it. "Go on and get some sleep," he said. "Mrs. O'Dell put sheets on your bed yesterday, so it's all ready."

"Don't you need help down here?"

He told me no, he was okay. "Mom usually wakes up before I go to bed, if she didn't wake up for dinner. I'll make sure she gets to the bathroom and has her medicine when she needs it."

Tomorrow night, I would stay downstairs with her. For now, he was right; I was drifting off where I sat. "Okay," I said. "If you're sure."

Once I got upstairs, though, I found out I was nowhere near tired enough. My room looked the same as the last time I'd seen it. There was the bed with its creaky metal frame, the navy-and-white striped quilt, and the dip in the middle of the mattress that showed where I had slept night after night for nearly twenty years. The wooden crucifix I had prayed to hung on the wall above my pillow. Then there was the narrow bureau, the cloudy round mirror, the tiny desk under the window, and the chrome lamp with its dusty white shade.

I could have been six years old again, climbing up to bed in the chilly house after my mother had ordered me to put my pencil and paper away for the night, and Dad had seconded it with, "She's right, son. Growing boys need their sleep." I would have scrubbed my face and hands in the kitchen, where she could check my fingernails and behind my ears. Then Dad would have kissed the top of my head. "See you in the morning."

Now I threw my grip on the bed and undid the buckles. I had brought a set of flannel pajamas, remembering how cold this house got at night. I changed into them fast, but goosebumps still jumped up on my arms and legs when the air hit them.

I wasn't six anymore. I wasn't twenty, either, and this wasn't that summer when the world had fallen and shattered. But there in that room, the darkness rolled in from all four walls at once, and from the floor and ceiling too. *Dad.*

A pair of hands seemed to catch me around the chest, squeezing so hard that my ribs ached. My heartbeat cranked up to a drumroll and my legs felt as if all the bones in them had disappeared.

I flopped down on the edge of the mattress and got my head between my knees. Sweat slid down my back, gluing the flannel shirt to my skin. This had all happened before, but not for a long time; not since I had packed up and run from Philly. Now the past crowded into the room.

Nicky, what happened to you? Why didn't you do what you planned?

Because you died, Dad. You died and I fell and broke and couldn't put myself back together.

I had wanted to think that summer was gone, buried the way my father's body was buried in the cemetery at Saints Peter and Paul. I'd let myself think I had, finally, managed to put myself back together. Now my shield lay shivered in pieces, and I understood that I was just as broken as ever.