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The Song of Nick

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Dedication

This is for Nicky,
and for all the angels of Woonsocket

Abstract

The Song of Nick

By

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Chair: Robert Colby

This is a personal essay, autobiographical in format, detailing my work on a project of a highly personally nature – namely, the theatricalized memorializing of my younger brother, who was among the 100 victims of the fire that destroyed the Station Nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, in February of 2003. In this narrative, I discuss, informally, my methodological approach to this project and my increased understanding of the nature of memorializing, as well as the deep layers of personal history behind it, paying particular attention to the emotional response of the community that helped to create/witness the theatrical/memorial event.

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Oh cold, rigid, dreadful Death, set up thine altar here, and dress it with such terrors as thou hast at thy command: for this is thy dominion! But of the loved, revered, and honoured head, thou canst not turn one hair to thy dread purposes, or make one feature odious. It is not that the hand is heavy and will fall down when released; it is not that the heart and pulse are still; but that the hand was open, generous, and true; the heart brave, warm, and tender; and the pulse a man's. Strike, Shadow, strike! And see his good deeds springing from the wound, to sow the world with life immortal.

-

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you.

-

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Perestroika*

Hope.

- RI State motto

I.

Introduction:

Transmutation

In February of 2003, a fire destroyed the Station Nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island. One hundred lives were lost. This tragedy, among the worst nightclub fires in American history, had a traumatic effect on the people of Rhode Island.

The youngest of the one hundred victims, barely eighteen, was my brother Nicholas. Already an accomplished actor and musician, Nick was a beloved member of the Rhode Island arts community. He was, of course, far more than that to my family.

One year after his passing, I guided the creation of a theatrical event that celebrated Nick's life and his genius. This is the story of that night – *A Night of Angels*.

My first nervous attempt to stage theatre at Emerson involved a circle, in a place called the Circle Theatre. A ring of actors dressed in black, carrying shovels. The play was called *Reverse Transcription*, by Tony Kushner, the man with the famous interest in

angels. The subject of the play was memorializing – ritualistic and bold, forbidden (in their case) and simultaneously imbued with the highest order of meaning. Six playwrights have gathered to bury a seventh, and the act of burial becomes a flashpoint event dredging forth everything from existential fear to furious transcendence. In the end, it's a character with the ironic name Happy who best articulates the whole point of the act itself: memorializing, he says, is about “the transmutation of horror into meaning.”

And what *meaning* is that? For each of those playwright characters, the dead seventh member of their circle means something different – and that's partly the point. He is for each of them a mirror into their own unfulfilled journeys; nothing they say about him is untrue, but the eulogies are tailored to meet the needs of each of the speakers; his accomplishments are selectively significant. If the modern pop philosophers are right, and if Nicky (the playwright of *this* story) was right, and this terrestrial life is primarily about *learning*, then we can best say it like this: memorializing is about making their learning our learning. What they meant, how they lived, what they did right, what wisdom they gained, becomes integrated into who we are - in all the specific ways that we need it. Kushner's dead playwright lives on because his friends have been fed by his spirit. I was reminded of ancient hopes, of the spirits of ritually martyred shepherd-kings finding resurrection in their people's crops, ensuring a vibrant harvest.

Indeed, I wanted to stage *Transcription* as both comedy and deep ritual. At the time, during my first year of graduate school, my rapidly emerging preoccupation involved finding ways to reintegrate live theatre and communal/ religious ritual. I was interested suddenly in theatre as a container of social function that has less to do with

entertainment and more to do with transformation, with remembrance, with legacy, and with matters of the spirit – that highest order of meaning. I was interested in human performance not as something peripheral for a society but absolutely culturally central, not as an expression of fiction but of utter metaphoric truth.

Never could I have foreseen my aesthetic interests and my personal needs merging, growing indistinguishable, as in the past year they have. I would have fought, and have fought, my whole adult life, tenaciously, to keep things in neat compartments; I would have gone on separating my protected and pure family existence from my work, which has often involved the most unstable of people and places. I lost this fight. And from this loss has emerged my truest work – the subject of this story.

Like *Reverse Transcription*, this is a story about circles: circles that encompass the personal and the communal, the private and the public, and the alchemy that transmutes one into the other.

II.

The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up

In September of 2001, I put on a show in a little hall in Coventry, Rhode Island, a musical play called *The Song of Mark*. It was my own reworking of a song cycle by the liturgical composer Marty Haugen. All those sentiments about theatre as primal truthful ritual trace back to this moment: a barely noticed fundraiser for a little church with a crumbling roof. For me, *Mark* was a radical aesthetic departure. It was a play with no stage, performed right on the floor; a river was brought to life by reams of blue fabric

held by actors; masks, stepladders, candles, and elements of the mass adorned the performance; actors passed out bread to people in the audience and threw confetti over them. My brother Bill played Jesus, enacting my interpretations of stories from the Gospel of Mark. My brother Nick played the Apostle John (as a 1980s rocker...it made sense at the time). This was a play about hope in the face of a demon-haunted world. The tagline, lifted from some obscure pericope and scrawled on the program, read, "Do not fear to hope."

It would be the last time all three of us worked together on anything. The very day after *Mark* closed, I moved to Boston to begin study at Emerson, and Bill moved to California to follow after a girl. After seventeen years during which we all lived together in our house in Cranston, two of us vanished in the course of a single day. Within months of this, we lost the house, which became a financial burden after the death of my father in 2000. My family's previously idyllic existence (and I call it that fully aware of the tendency and temptation to idealize the past, for idyllic it was), after so many years, was put through a sudden volley of stressors. For Nick, still in school, this was an awful thing to bear. He fell in love not long after that, with Gabby, and he says that she saved him. And his music saved him, too. And we all wish we could have saved him.

In some families, there is that one child.

Not everyone would understand. The structure of the family might have something to do with it, or particular spans in age between siblings. But for some families, there's one child, blessed with a peculiar warmth, humor, strength and intuition,

whose existence ties everyone else closer together, one child who is the mover and the standard for measurement of time and space and energy. For us, that was Nicky. He was ten years my junior and more than a brother. He was equal parts golden cherub and grinning imp, innocent/wise, manic/serene, dazzling/quiet, unassuming/unforgettable, brilliant in all the most unconventional ways. Nick was more than glue for my family; he was its beating, glowing heart, and he was my best friend.

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

At the age of ten he discovered performing. Publicly, that is; he'd been imitating Elvis and Michael Jackson in the living room his whole life, not to mention doing dead-on impressions of everyone we knew behind their backs. And when he discovered theatre, we all discovered theatre. Now Bill sings opera and I do this directing thing. It all started with that 1995 church youth ministry production of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*: Nicky as tiny precocious Linus, Billy as a lanky teenage beagle. I ran the spotlight and inwardly critiqued the director's every decision.

In 1997, a coin-toss twist of fate landed me, then an AmeriCorps volunteer, in overcrowded Woonsocket Middle School, directing my first play, *The Wizard of Oz*. A boy from the school dropped out of the Scarecrow role, and Nicky slipped in quietly. Playing the Scarecrow, Dorothy's innocent and guileless loyal friend, made a sort of indelible impact on Nicky, just as playing the Lion made a lifelong impact on a very determined WMS 8th grader named Matt. The two boys had a loose and jumpy chemistry even then, and the play became this beautiful obsession for them. They dreamed of one day getting the chance to do it again in a bigger way, in their same roles.

Nick and Matt did wind up back together. More unexpected turns brought them both, years later, to a place called the Stadium Theatre, which is just about the cultural Mecca of northern Rhode Island. When we stumbled into the place, to join an amateur song-and-dance fundraising group – the Encore Entertainers – the Stadium was only just recently rediscovered and still decrepit, its renovation just a nice community dream. Nick and Matt, charming and bright, were the company's greatest young talents.

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

couple of songs (and two buffet tables full of Swedish meatballs and salad) and very bluntly started asking the confused audience for suggestions.

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

There was by now a general consensus that Nicky – our Nicky – could do pretty much anything. And yet, at home, he was still Nicky – our Nicky - adamant in his refusal to grow up, and smarter than everyone else because of it.

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

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

We would talk and talk about going back to the Stadium, which was now beautiful in its full renovation, but instead we floated around and did things like *Song of Mark*. And then I was in Boston, and we were both miserable all the time. The week I left, Nick sent me a long e-mail, all about how this felt like the final nail in the coffin of his childhood, that he was losing his hold on the person he had been his whole life. And I wrote back and told him, among other things, that the child inside him would never die – that it was the truest part of him. I didn't know if that stayed with him or not because he didn't write back.

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

Nicky went from place to place, from crowd to crowd, trying on different masks and playing different roles – and getting each one right – looking, I think, for the place where he'd most belong. Still (now more than ever, in fact), Nicky was the truest real-life *Catcher in the Rye* (which I tried to get him to read; he wasn't really the reading type). He was, like Holden Caulfield, genuinely hopeful, longing and at the same time bewildered by the world, by people, by the pain they inflict upon one another, and most of all by the appalling inevitability of growing up. Our home had been an anchor, and now we had lost that, too.

There was a song from *The Song of Mark* that Nick played – in his own rocked out way, with a dubbed-over double-guitar attack – called “Walk On.” It was the Calvary song, sung before and after Christ’s death:

You must pass through the Jordan to the other side.

There is no going back now; there is no place to hide.

Now my God waits to greet me on the other side.

Walk on; walk on, into the Jordan.

This was Nick’s song now.

In February of 2002, almost exactly a year before the Station fire, a little ACT girl named Grace got suddenly very sick and died within a matter of hours. I sat with Nicky and talked to him about Grace’s death, trying to help him process this abhorrent thing, which is the death of young people. We talked about people being deprived of decades of their lives, and I remember him saying that he knew “that it all happened for a reason, but it still *sucks*. And if I was that girl’s parents, I would want to know what the reason was.” And I told him that we can’t know why – but maybe it had something to do with the way people’s lives would be affected, even changed for the better. He stayed pretty much completely fixated, and pretty much unconvinced.

Within a few weeks of all this, I received from Nicky the first draft of a play he had suddenly written about three guardian angels – a girl named Grace, a boy named Levi, and a third spirit named Cyrus who was clearly supposed to be Nicky himself. Recently deceased, they meander around New York, chatting and bickering, reminiscing

about their funerals, frustrated by humans' inability to see them, angered by the world's wretchedness, mystified by God's seeming inaction, and relentlessly delivering a message of hope to an anguished young man named Adam Tyler and a street corner fortune teller, Mama Marie. The message expressed itself in different forms, but its final delivery was a familiar one: "Do not fear to hope." The play seemed to have sprung from an allegedly true story I used to tell Nicky when he was little, but his imagination (or, as he would say, "inspiration") had run off with it, and he had inserted himself into the tale. The play was called *They Walk Among Us*.

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

In the fall of 2003 things began to look up. Nick came up to Emerson to play electric guitar for my musical theatre project (*Jesus Christ Superstar* – more fun with martyrs), and he and I started to regain the deep connection that I had felt slipping when I took off for Boston. We talked constantly, and he genuinely seemed to have this sudden feeling that his life, so recently so awful, was now suffused with a kind of magic. Obsessed with his childhood more than ever before, he'd spend hours poring over my family's voluminous home video collection. He talked about his growing sense of awe, of all the same mysteries that had always enthralled me, mysteries of silence and time and distance and memory. He remembered that once, long ago, I'd told him that there was a song I associated with my deep childhood but could never remember exactly why – Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are" – and he began playing it on his guitar for me.

In the very last months and weeks, Nicky started to confide in me strange dreams he was having and what he believed were visitations – from my father, and from other people, men he didn't know. Together we both witnessed odd happenings and some incredible synchronicities (Aquarian jargon for meaningful coincidences), but Nicky was literally having visions and I felt that something important was going to happen. I didn't think this could be something bad.

Often Nick would dream of St. Jude's, the church parish where we'd all been raised. St. Jude's was once our spiritual home back when things were still Idyllic, until my father, shortly before his death, lost his job as music minister there, and then we never felt welcome. So as with the Stadium and our old house, we were shut out of St. Jude's and would just go there during this time, often at night, to walk around outside.

I was home with Nicky just a couple of days before his band was set to open for Great White at the Station nightclub. The night before, he came into my bedroom and sat next to my girlfriend Leah and me, to serenade us the way he always did, by making up songs on his guitar about people we knew, and forcing me to sing along. He made up this whole thing about Leah's heavyset sister and how much she loves corn chips. He said, "OK Schlingy (which he called me), now I'm going to sing you a song from that famous musical, *Carousel*." He then began singing some song about Leah's sister that had the word "carousel" in it, but had nothing to do with the musical *Carousel*, which he'd never seen. "I have no idea why I thought of that; I don't even know anything about that musical. It just popped into my head." Then he mooned us and went to bed.

The last time I saw Nicky was the very next morning. He was still in bed when we were leaving for Boston, and we were just a few feet from the door when I stopped, suddenly absolutely compelled to go lay in bed beside him for a minute, like I used to do when he was little. He woke up a little bit and hugged me. Then I left, and drove to Boston feeling overcome by the most awful unhappiness and dread.

I wasn't thinking about *Reverse Transcription* on February 21st, 2003, when I was awakened by a phone call from a dream about Nicky blowing out a candle. The phone was ringing too early. For about a week, I had been afraid to leave my cell phone on at night. There had never been a time in my life since Nicky's birth when I wasn't constantly preoccupied with fears for his safety, but I had never, before that week, sat staring at my phone before going to sleep, agonizing about whether I would rather receive The News live or in a voice mail. So when the phone rang early, I knew. Then came three or four days that I don't talk about.

III.

Please Take Me Back Home

I wasn't thinking about *Reverse Transcription* when we held the memorial service, within a week of the fire. Not consciously. The pain of loss is beyond the scope of words. It is the most violent, cataclysmic and cruel of realities. Its casualties are

motivation, hope, and the past. And the future. It is a dumb, stubborn thing. It turns the brightest memories against you.

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

Just like that, four years later, we were back in St. Jude’s. Like Nicky says in his song “Forgotten Bliss,” which played that night, filling the space, “*Oh my darling, please take me back home.*” Nicky, who had spent his last feverish few years trying to figure out where he fit, with whom he fit, on that night brought together eleven hundred people.

My written eulogy described the Carousel story, and how it occurred to me only later that *Carousel*, the musical, is in essence about a young man, Billy, who dies and is

allowed to return as a spirit to visit his family. While the musical's exact context is thornier than I made it seem with that description, what I think was most important is that musical's famous song: "You'll Never Walk Alone." Later, a medium would tell me that Nicky's referenced that musical on that last night because of the guidance of my father, whose name had, of course, been Billy. Shortly after the fire Dave insisted I find a picture of Nicky riding a Carousel horse – and miraculously, an absolutely perfect picture of Nicky at age ten riding the Roger Williams Park Carousel and looking completely glorious, a picture I could never remember seeing before, turned up in an album I had looked through countless times. That was the beginning of the Carousel stories – another subject for another time.

And then after the first memorial, there were months that went by, and memories from that time are like drifting ice floes that surface, on occasion, as if coming up for air. For the most part it is a blur. And this paper is not about that time.

But one memories is of sitting in the corner of a candlelit office while a psychic medium named Cindy has, she claims, brought me into dialogue with Nicky. Across the way on her bookshelf is the drawing of Nicky that had been used on the cover of the memorial program, sitting right next to a picture of a little girl with blonde hair. Only much later did I learn that the little girl was Grace, whose father had been here a year earlier. Cindy knew nothing of that connection then. I said to Cindy:

"I still need him."

"He still needs you, too."

This hurt me because it sounded ridiculous and false.

“How could he need me?”

“He needs you to be his voice,” she said.

Another time she said, “He keeps talking about the play. Everything is about this play. But he says, don’t make it the rock opera.” Ah, because he and I had been planning to write a rock opera, but the perfect story eluded us. So what play does he mean? She said the one I had mentioned in my written eulogy. The one about the angels. “Do it, and then do it again,” she said. “Do the play, and then when all of Nicky’s brothers – and he does say *three* brothers – are all there, then do it again.” But we barely knew David, Nicky’s half-brother from his father’s previous marriage, and Bill was still living in California. Still, she said it kept coming to her, “Do it, and then do it again.”

We heard it this way: Grace had told her mother that she would find feathers, and after she passed, feathers started turning up. And then Nicky passed, and we found feathers. Beautiful white feathers, the fluff of the bird, what a Native American shaman told us were called the “breath of God.” We found them in a jacket’s inside pocket, on the seat or dashboard of a locked car, on a pillow. No one was leaving them for us, and we certainly weren’t leaving them for each other. They floated down from nowhere; they blew into our face when we were walking. This paper also can’t be about that – about what I call the Signs and Wonders, and there have been many – but the feathers are important.

And that song – that Billy Joel song – was all of a sudden *everywhere*.

We did it, and then we did it again. First as a staged reading, in June, in a church in Pawtucket, as part of a classical music concert fundraiser to benefit the Nicky O Foundation, a charity started by Nicky’s father Dave. I put it together in two weeks with a youth cast made up of ACT kids. It was rough but well-loved, and in it I began to carve out the rough shapes that would take fuller form months later.

Sometime in late April, Muriel, the producer of Encore Rep, approached me with the idea of starting a college scholarship fund in Nicky’s name, and of kicking it off with a fundraiser. We were able to get February 20. They wanted to let me do whatever I wanted. The details of how it all came to be are much less important than the fact that we made the choice, months in advance, to observe Nicky’s passing not with some kind of religious ceremony, but with a night of theatre. From that point on, February 20, 2004 was all there was for me.

III.

Walk On

In mid-January of 2004, we held the first rehearsal for what we were then just calling “The Fundraiser.” I walked into this room, in the little Woonsocket church basement containing our rehearsal spaces, full of hesitant faces from this glowing moment in my distant past (because now everything prior to February 20 was very, very distant), and I thanked them, described what this show would be, and then said, “This is

the most important thing that I've ever done in my life. I mean, no *pressure* or anything.” And then, “There are people in Woonsocket and in the rest of Rhode Island right now who have no idea that on February 20, their lives are going to be changed.”

High standards perhaps, but also truthful. I needed to impart, even if just vaguely, the total potential scope of this, that it wasn't just another community theatre musical or variety show. I knew that some of these actors hadn't known Nicky at all; a few others had known him only just barely, and for these people, at this point, none of this was personal. It was volunteer charity; there was that sense of humility and pity. The rest – for whom this was very personal – each had his or her own reasons for being there. But I would venture to guess that universally, they were all there because they wanted to do something *for Nicky*. The statement I made, rather, was meant to contain a slightly different motive: *Nicky and I and all of you are working together, and we are in the business of changing lives*. And that is how seriously we will take this.

Soon there were over sixty people involved; as we cast our nets wider, more and more of these faces out of my home video collection found out about what we were doing. I kept the cast of *They Walk Among Us* to about twenty-five.

The first rehearsal for *They* followed exactly two weeks after the initial gathering. Both more vocal and more nervous, I was holding myself to the highest standards. This was about *Nicky*. After this past year (which felt like one very long day), this had to be the culminating and resounding result of all my learning and practice in theater. I knew that for this sensitive group, unsure of what to expect, everything I said was important.

Modulating the tone and keeping people laughing was crucial; involving everyone was paramount.

My mom and Nicky's dad were there, as was David, a whole BFA in advance of everyone else. He had agreed eagerly, and he would, at best, lead the cast by his example, at worst, feel completely out of his element. And then, I didn't really *know* David, and David knew Nicky, his own brother, far less intimately than did many of the casual friends gathered in that room. Gabby was there, to play Grace, and her brother Alex would be Levi, reprising their roles from the staged reading. Matt was there. It was a large group of strangers bound by Nicky, their one commonality.

I started with an icebreaker that emphasized eye contact and name recognition, which I told everyone, afterwards, was also about permission, because in theatre accepting – saying yes – was more interesting than saying no. “Right, David?”

“That's right.”

“I'll be checking everything with the resident BFA.” And he laughed and everyone followed.

After reading through the script, I called for general impressions. One girl, Becky, broke the ice almost immediately by just saying “awesome” several times (and I was immediately grateful). An older woman named Marion, who had never known Nicky personally but whose daughter, also present, had worked with him in a summer camp play, said, “This play is very humanist. It has a very general positive message that I think will appeal to people who aren't Christian.” I took that chance to describe Nicky's spirituality – broad and benevolent, rigorously non-dogmatic, but of utmost importance in

his life. It was not one aspect or dimension of who he was; Nicky lived the spiritual life. The play itself, after all, is both reverent and irreverent, crass and transcendent – paradoxical as Nicky himself.

My next words were: “This project is different from any other project any of us has ever done for a lot of obvious reasons, but that understanding needs to live in my head only. You guys just do your thing and treat this like any other play.” In saying this I was attempting not to diminish the meaning of the experience, which I knew wouldn’t happen no matter what I said, but rather to relieve some pressure. How hard and strange this must have been for people, with Nicky’s parents right there, and with these expectations I had set.

Of course, the converse of this lived in my head too: I *did* need to force myself to treat it like any other play. I needed to analyze its on grounds of plot and character; I needed to determine its structure, its Spine and its themes; I needed to respond to it with a Concept, and then Table it with the cast, and do Character and Scene work, determine motivations, develop improvisations, give blocking, give notes. I needed to direct it.

So I began – my First Rehearsal Discussion started in earnest with (as is my practice) more fishing. I asked this time for a brainstorm of allusions and references – what made this play a play about our world? So *Dogma* came up, of course, and the references to pro wrestling, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and ‘80s rock bands. What I was really looking seemed to have gone unnoticed, until Matt, for the first time that night, raised his hand.

“It’s *The Wizard of Oz*,” he said. And I nodded and I think my eyes must have lit up, because *of course* he would get that. And amazingly, what led him to notice was an allusion that I had overlooked entirely – Mama Marie’s first complete line of dialogue: “You are feeling lost.” This closed the circle of the play – my understanding of the *Oz* connection had grown out of from Adam Tyler’s first words to her in the *last* scene: “It all happened quicker than the blink of an eye.”

Allowing the cast to puzzle over this, I launched into my stories. I talked about little Grace. I detailed the history of “Do Not Fear to Hope,” now Nicky’s literal epitaph. I described the historical Cyrus, the Persian king whose image had inspired history’s oldest surviving winged angel statue (and the question of whether or not Nicky even knew that). Together we discussed angels - their history, or the history of the idea, how it emerged, where and why it arises in different belief systems; we talked hypothetically about their challenges and restrictions, their undying love for humans, their loss of free will. A single direct quote guided me in this, remembered from a session with Cindy months before – “If only you could see the world the way I see it now.” And then, finally, I took a good long time to relate, with as much ghost story wizardry as I could manage, the incident described to me many years ago by three friends about their alleged encounter with *something* – maybe angels – one night on Narragansett Beach, and how Nicky, entranced by the possibility, had taken that seed and worked backwards to tell the story of how those angels had spent their afternoon.

By now the atmosphere in the room was blessedly relaxed. I spoke finally about the play’s theme of hidden grace in the world (street corner fortune tellers as genuine

shamans, angels walking unseen in Manhattan), of the sought-after truth that hides right under our eyes, in our own backyards...and thus, *The Wizard of Oz*. So what did Cyrus, Grace, Levi and Adam Tyler have to do with Judy Garland?

It was, I said, both in what these characters embody and in what they each seek (yet possess all along). And I handed out my Brain Map, a teaching tool I had long ago cobbled together from numerous archetypal four-fold models of human personality and then patterned around the *Wizard of Oz* characters. Thus, corresponding to the categories on my map, there was the iconoclastic and creative Cyrus, a font of innocent Wisdom like the Scarecrow; the empathic Grace, as full of Heart as a Tin Man; the authoritative and courageous Levi, always trying to be King of the Forest. And finally there's Adam Tyler, our story's Dorothy, who just wants, desperately and more desperately, to go back *home*. "What happened to the little boy?" he says. "To the little boy I used to be?"

I passed out a mandala of archangels that I had found, dating back to third century apocrypha, which seemed to correspond beautifully to my modern neurological mandala. With the names of our angel characters penciled in, suddenly it made sense. How much of this did Nicky actually know? Well, he knew the Brain Map, and as I explained to the cast, "the most vehement insult he kept in his verbal repertoire was to call you LB!" – i.e., left-brained. That much, *everyone* there understood.

I left the cast with this: "This play, like every good story, has what I call a 'heart.' Grace expresses Nicky's message, which he said again and again, every day of his life: '*Everything will be just fine.*' It's nothing more complicated than that. That's the heart of

the play. And that's what we mean when we talk about hope." In other words, if only we could see the world the way *he* sees it.

What I didn't say to everyone, but would discuss privately with the lead actors, was that Nicky really appears twice in this play. He had written himself in, without question, as Cyrus. But, less obviously, he was also Adam Tyler. Enlightened angel and vulnerable human, hopeful and lost, optimistic and hurt, knowing and agonizing all at the same time – the plight of an Indigo Child if I ever heard one. This had become apparent to me long before. What I only really realized that night was this: Nicky really was a genius, and he had been right: a year earlier, when I had first read this play, I really *hadn't* gotten it.

I got an email from the mother of a girl named Hannah, a twelve-year old cast member, who had not known Nicky and who was there, shy and eager, on someone's recommendation. She had just, a few months earlier, played Dorothy in Encore Rep's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Her mother, Suzanne, said she just needed to tell me how "awed and deeply moved" Hannah had been by the discussion and by the angels-on-the-beach story. This was when I first thought that perhaps I was doing all right.

To sum up the rehearsal process in a phrase: purity of purpose. This feeling, capping off that awful year, was itself a kind of alchemy – aimlessness turned into pure drive, and the most strangling anguish imaginable channeled into a sense of mission. I wasn't alone. A fierce dedication had poured forth from this community. I spent this time

worrying, working and reading everything Nicky ever wrote: his hard, irresistible journals, poems and songs, eerie and prescient, dreaming and bleeding.

David's involvement with the show was in so many ways our greatest blessing. Despite his distance from Nicky in life, he did a remarkable job of capturing Cyrus – far better, truthfully, than the boy who had known Nick well and tried valiantly to portray him in the staged reading. David and Nicky are a case for nature over nurture; while David may be the more serious, intense person, their commonalities are astounding. And, like Cyrus, both seem to enjoy nothing more than getting a rise out of people. David would say, “this is giving me the chance to get to know Nicky a little bit better now than we ever had the chance to when he was here.” And he seemed quietly overjoyed by every new similarity he found. In the slide of Nicky as Timon from *The Lion King*, for example, Nick is wearing sunglasses. David was totally delighted. “That little bit of business,” he said, “that cool little touch – that’s exactly what I would have done.” If Nicky had genuinely come through with Cindy, telling me to wait until “all my brothers” could come together for this event, I could finally understand why.

The first news coverage had been on February 6th, when the local Fox affiliate came and did a five-minute feature on the show and on the script. The newscaster, Walt Buteau, had heard the story from Dave and was enthralled by the idea that Nicky had written this story so shortly before his passing. They came to a rehearsal, putting everyone on their best behavior, and early on pulled me away for an interview. I mention this because of a single peculiar and lovely incident: As soon as the cameras started rolling, a complete stranger walked into my rehearsal and directly in view of the camera,

looked around, and then left. No one had any idea what he was doing there. He was dressed in a shimmering tuxedo jacket and top hat. It was the arguably most ridiculous and distracting thing that Nicky could have arranged for me in that moment. Only later did it occur to me that the man had been dressed like Willy Wonka – whom Nicky played in fourth grade, in a virtually identical costume.

And meanwhile, everyone suddenly started finding white feathers. Floating down to sit beside them on the bus. Blowing out of a car's heater while "Calling All Angels" (one of the songs I used in the show) was playing on the radio. Dave was interviewed on a public access show, and one small white feather, at the very end of the broadcast, drifted down from above and startled everyone in the studio and innumerable others who saw the interview on TV. The actors, most of whom were no doubt as self-contained as most people when it came to their spiritual lives, were suddenly sharing stories. My set designer, Sharon, told me, "Finally, I have a place where I can talk about these things without being afraid of sounding crazy." I was feeling the same way.

I was interviewing constantly over tech week and at the same time slowly realizing that it had been a year since I had seen Nicky. It was a canal of escalating strangeness and surreality and pain, with an event at the end that had grown to feel personally apocalyptic. I interviewed as calmly as I could for NPR and all the local press, and then on Tuesday of that week Dave began shouting loudly from the living room that he had gotten a call from *The Today Show*. I announced it with make-believe off-handedness to the cast that night ("It's great," I said, "If, you know, you're into all

that bourgeois mainstream stuff. . . . We tried to get *An Hour With Bob* to come, but we'll have to settle for NBC.”), and they arrived the very next day, interviewing Dave in the Stadium lobby and shooting us on the set of the play. Their visit in and of itself was the subject of Thursday's lead headlines in the local Woonsocket paper.

Bill flew in from California at the very last moment. The company had been practicing a song all week – “Walk On,” the Calvary song – in which Bill sang the lead part. One cast member, Jane, said to me later, “It was the most beautiful feeling when Bill arrived and finally completed the song. It was like the last piece of this vast puzzle clicked into place and it all just felt so right.” We finished those last two rehearsals with the cast, at last, ritually reading, in alphabetical order, the names of all one hundred victims of the fire. Nick's name, by no intentional effort of mine, fell into the hands of Matt – out of fifty cast members, it was Matt who got Nicky's name.

After they finished on Wednesday night, after the reading of the names and the final two songs, there was utter silence onstage – no chatting, no giggling, no hands raised. Fifty people, children included, letting the celestial sound of their voices simply give way to unapologetic silence. I walked down the aisle toward them, and I felt nothing but eyes on me. The evening that had begun with all the usual joking, the rehearsal that had begun with “Hakuna Matata” suddenly felt worlds and ages away. Onstage, I stood in the middle of the circle of these expectant actors, and I was overwhelmed, humbled, and awed by this energy, solemn and pure and holy, palpable and visible as air. I could hardly find words. I told them only to go home and sleep.

IV.

Angels in Woonsocket

And so, one month later, there was *A Night of Angels*.

The cast was in a terrific mood that was also totally different than other opening night casts. Maybe it was just my own anxiety, but I thought, *they are expecting to hear from me now, they want to know what I will say*. So at 6:00, the whole cast assembled on stage, in a circle. Many of them I had worked with closely on the play or on the few musical numbers I had staged; others, some of the soloists, were those same faces from the past whose living presence were validation of memory and history - my personal sacred memory, sacred history. Nicky history.

I said, "I don't know what to say." And I proceeded to say nothing. There was *so much* on that stage, and so much in me. "I guess I'm just going to talk until I can't talk anymore," I said - acknowledging the emotion. "And I think that's about it." Then I started to walk away. Laughter, the tension broke. Then, "Let's go around the circle and say a word or a phrase describing how you feel. Or, if you want, what you believe it is we're doing here tonight."

"Honored." "Humbled." "Amazed." "Speechless." "Haunted." "I dreamed about Nicky last night. He was excited. He was trying to drag me out of bed." "I dreamed about Nicky last night, too. What's this about corn chips?" "It's amazing to be here, to be able to help Nick relive some of his greatest moments onstage."

Then it returned to me, and I said, "This is about hope. What we're doing here tonight is about hope, because right now everyone is afraid to hope. When I first started at Emerson College, my first directing project was a short one-act play called *Reverse*

Transcription, by Tony Kushner, who wrote *Angels in America*. This was a play about memorializing and what it means, and how to do it. And one of the characters, who was played by Matt..." Matt *had* played Happy, which was amazing, because Emerson is a whole other world, and Matt, then a freshman at Suffolk, had only played the part because I encountered a sudden need for an actor and ran into him that night on the subway. Now, he was standing right beside me in the circle. "...a character named Happy, who said it like this: 'it's about *the transmutation of horror into meaning*.'" "

"The bottom line is this: we've been living with this for a year, and now we're doing something about it." Then I paused, unsure of whether or not to say what came next. "OK, so here's something I wasn't going to tell you. *The Today Show* was here yesterday, and I know a lot of you were disappointed when you watched it this morning and saw how little of the interview made the air." It had been literally four words of Dave's interview and a two-second shot of him walking down the street. "But we weren't surprised when we saw the broadcast. They seemed to be really more interested in the fire and in the tragedy than in what we are doing here. Before they left, Dave overheard the producer talking to the network exec (or whoever) on the phone, and he said, 'So we shot the other interview this morning, and it went well...she had a lot of *really great burns*.'" "

There were sounds of shock.

I said, "In the face of this world, this world that we live in, what you people are doing here tonight is a bold - and courageous - and *revolutionary* statement." And now everyone was crying, and also beaming with their own pride, and it was honest, and true.

“You are making a proclamation to everyone here tonight, through your beautiful theatrical power - exactly the way Nicky would have done it - about total perseverance and love in the face of horror. This is totally about Nicky, and it’s totally about so much more than that. This is totally for Nicky, and it’s totally for so many more.” I lost my train of thought there, and no one seemed to notice; I passed the ball to the actors. “Alex – what’s Levi’s message for the world?”

“That God loves you, no matter what, unconditionally.”

“David, speak for Cyrus.”

“There’s always a light at the end of the tunnel. And that the child inside you never dies...that it’s the truest part of you.”

“And Gabby, speak for Grace.”

“Our fate is in our own hands. We can choose.”

“And?”

“Oh! That everything will be just fine.” People laughed. At rehearsals she often went up on that line, and I reminded her repeatedly that it was *only the most important line in the entire production*.

I asked the soloists to think about their songs, and about how so many of them had similar messages; a few even sang about angels. It was a marvel that we had created, without consciously intending to do so, such a thematically unified production.

“Tonight, we look to Nick’s example; we look at how much he accomplished in his short life and the wisdom he gained in that time, and we let Nicky’s learning become our learning.”

And it was hard, as it had all been hard, because of this:

Their Nicky was not my Nicky, not by a long shot. But this was the work. A few people, including our co-music director (named, appropriately, Mark) showed off tattoos of Nick's name, or his sacred number (the mysterious 41, which followed Nicky through his whole life and which now followed all of us...another subject for another time), or of the phrase "Do not fear to hope." One adult cast member told me later on how this completely altered her concept of tattoos.

I asked for permission to lead the cast in a brief, all-inclusive prayer. It was just this, "Father or mother or whoever. Creator. Guide us well and true tonight, for our intention is noble and our hearts are pure."

And then I broke the circle. Derek, the music director, came over and hugged me. He had been working placidly on the songs and only recently saw that the play dealt with difficult themes like homophobia. From what I understand, he was, for awhile after that, terribly uncomfortable with the production, until he met and spoken with Amelia, a gay cast member who wanted so desperately to be a part of this production – in part because of the strong message of acceptance and equality in the play – that she drove an hour and a half from Smith College to and from every rehearsal. Derek seemed suddenly inspired by both Amelia and, at last, by the play, and it was on that night that many of us met his partner for the first time. He said to me after that prayer, "That was beautiful." I said, "I'm just glad I don't have to say it all again."

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

He walks among us

A year ago, there were no words. Language felt inadequate.

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

Now there are words.

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

We have come to learn otherwise.

We began to learn this when eleven hundred people attended his memorial service; and in this, we think Nick learned some things also - about the purpose of his own life. That was the beginning of a year that has been as full of wonder and hope as it has been of shock and stinging separation. In the aftermath of horror, there has been the amazing, stunning blessing of Nick's continued presence; of signs and signals that have defied a thousand times over all rational

logic (and on occasion the laws of physics), synchronicities that stand far outside suspicion of coincidence, and miracles that have extinguished our fear of death. It would be impossible to share with you every story, but our hope is that tonight we might share some of the hope. Although our sadness will never end, although we all might wish every second that we could have him back, to see the man he would have become...it is possible to transform sorrow into meaning.

In fact, it may be the whole point.

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

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

- Chris O'Neill, 2/20/04

The production opened at 7:00 to a house of 569, with Dave speaking to the crowd. He announced that he was the father of Nicholas O'Neill and was applauded and cheered; the energy in the room was established. He joked with the person sitting in the seat that had been dedicated to Nicky that he should scoot over, in case Nick wanted to

squeeze in there with him. More laughter, thunderous applause – 569 people wanting to believe.

Then he told the story about how Nick's final words to him had been, "The show must go on."

"Tonight," he said, "the show goes on for Nicky."

Then he walked backwards into a chair, so we knew Nicky was with us.

The first act of the show was completely musical. All along, this had been the biggest source of stress. It was my own idea to feature a segment where songs and dances performed in dedication to Nicky would be interspersed with songs that he performed at Encore, done as it were in tribute, with a slide of Nicky performing the number shown at the end of each. It seemed like a decent idea in theory, and only later did it occur to me that in actual production it just might not work.

First was the issue of congruity and tone. Would people be willing to accept a show that ran back and forth from something very painful and honest like "My Immortal" to a piece like "Under The Sea?" Would this feel uncomfortable or even worse, offensive? Even more offensive, to me, was the notion that *A Night of Angels* might feel like a "variety show," a "musical revue," or, God forbid, a "talent show."

Secondly, in seeming contradiction, was my fear of presenting "A Night of Repetition." There were a great many soloists – more "reflection" solos than "tribute" songs - most of them female, and most of their initial song choices drifted toward the yearning and plaintive. People had come out the woodwork hoping to be a part of this

production, and I wanted everyone, especially if they had indeed known Nicky, to have a voice, and most of all their *own* voice. Even the show's total length became a concern.

It was a single sudden flash of insight, literally days before rehearsals began, that cleared away the bulk of my worries. Praying for the producer's approval, I proposed a drastic alteration of the show's format. The idea was simply to have the whole cast onstage for the entire first act, wearing their own causal attire, apparently "sitting around" (actually carefully blocked), supporting one another and helping to lubricate the tonal transitions. They would attend to the serious solos, they would throw their energy into the lively musical numbers, and the overall effect would hopefully be what I called a "coffeehouse" intimacy.

Beyond that, all I could do was to guide soloists in their choices of songs, structure the sequence in a way that kept it, to the greatest extent possible, from feeling jarring, and then hope that the normal rules of attrition, with people dropping out for various reasons, would apply. (They did.)

The show thus began quietly, with two girls singing Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Pie Jesu," a meditative opening number. No one else was onstage at that point. Behind them, for the duration of Act One, was a movie screen. Behind the screen, the life-sized angel statue that would be used during the play was lit gently, making it faintly visible behind the singers.

That gentle piece gave way to the livelier "Seasons of Love," from *Rent*, which Nick had performed in one of the cabaret shows. We re-solidified the movie screen, hiding the angel statue, and replaced it with a simple rainbow prism that hovered above

the heads of the performers. The effect had formed during tech week as a total accident involving a stage light with a loose cover. I insisted that no one fix it. One of the solos was Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors," sung by a girl named Bethy who spoke to me about how Nicky had often encouraged her, in private conversations, helping her through her low self-esteem. "True Colors," the first of the solos, echoes some of Nicky's words to her, as well as Cyrus the angel's words to Adam, with the following refrain:

But I see your true colors shining through.

I see your true colors and that's why I love you.

So don't be afraid to let them show.

Your true colors, true colors are beautiful, like a rainbow.

And best of all was that word 'rainbow:' yet another *Wizard of Oz* connection.

When "Seasons of Love" began, the cast strolled on, singing in camaraderie, in groups of two or three at a time. With that particular tonal shift, I think the audience understood what type of show this would be.

The first act, in performance, had a rapturous energy. My two concerns, or what was left of them, cancelled each other out. The musical numbers broke up the solos, which were also more varied than I had anticipated – some were pure rock; one was a dance piece. The first "tribute" song, "Under the Sea" from *The Little Mermaid*, may have taken some people by surprise, but once they saw the gigantic slide of Nicky in his Sebastian costume at the end, they understood, and after that they seemed, from their emotional response, willing to go wherever the show wanted to take them.

As the first act began to wind down, Matt performed the last two tribute songs – “One Last Kiss,” from *Bye Bye Birdie*, and then, of course, “If I Only Had a Brain,” the Scarecrow’s song. The act ended with two songs chosen by my mother, both Josh Groban pieces that had taken on great personal significance in the past year. First, a young man named Nick L., who had worked with Nicky at Encore for several years performed “To Where You Are;” behind him was the act’s major slideshow, a series of over fifty slides that visually documented Nicky’s life.

The last slide in the slideshow, out of chronological order, was one that I had written about in Nick’s written eulogy (where I had related the story of our last conversation) of Nick at age ten on the carousel horse. I left it up as Bill took the stage and began to sing “You Raise Me Up.” About halfway through the song, I removed the slide, and Bill took center stage. Singing directly to the audience, he soared through the rest, and then quietly announced intermission, to be followed by the world premier of *They Walk Among Us*.

It was the slides, more than anything else, exquisite and hypnotic, which tore me apart. Perhaps it was the sound of Billy’s voice in accompaniment; perhaps it was the sheer vast scale, the giant size of the photos shown on the screen of Nicky’s beloved Stadium. But mostly, I think, it goes back again to the awful dichotomy of that night – that whatever this meant for everyone else there, it meant something quite different to myself and to my family. Most of the “Nickys” that appeared over the heads of the actors were *our* Nickys – the ones that belonged exclusively to my family, the Nicky that

existed before the actor, the comedian, the rocker, the Nicky that most of the actors never knew, but that made up most of his earthly life. My heart was projected on a wall, on *display*; my family's deepest joy and most inexpressible misery were made spectacle, as Billy's voice carried us all. Billy, who spent his life, it sometimes seemed, bickering with Nicky, now calling out to him, 'you raise me up.'

And still, I interrogate the little boy in all those pictures, *what were even you doing in that club?*

But this was the work.

The longest intermission of my life concluded; safe darkness settled round.

Act Two began with Hannah sitting off to the side of the stage, next to the signboard for Mama Marie's Psychic Readings. A single light picked her out as she sang "Over the Rainbow." As the song concluded, I transitioned directly into the play by fading her and slowly bringing up the light on the statue, behind the scrim, causing it to glow with increasing brightness as that haunting music also swelled.

Here I must pause again, to share some aspects of my production concept – my response to Nicky's play, that is, the ways in which our thinking came together to create this moment.

In the world of the play, the angels are able to appear as visible or invisible to humans by snapping their fingers. To facilitate this, and (reverting to theatre-speak) to highlight what I consider the play's spine – *to drive away the world's darkness* – I had a squadron of actors, dressed in black, to stand in the orchestra pit with high-powered

flashlights. Two of these “Flashlight Angels” were assigned to each of the four angel characters in the play. The idea was that their flashlights – the modern hand-held means of “driving away darkness” – would create a halo around the faces of the angels, and would disappear when they were invisible to humans. In the staged reading this worked fairly well, but under the Stadium Theatre’s harsher stage lights, it worked only sporadically, just enough, I think, to convey the message.

The inclusion of the angel statue, created by Sharon from a mannequin, grew out of our theme of everyday holiness. I wanted to show “the angel” as common symbol, with its own iconic language, and to contrast a traditional image, frozen and delicate, with the flesh and blood angels who, during the first scene, sit around its base, laughing and arguing. When the angel Grace later appears in full angel attire, she is standing on the same pedestal, lit the same way – as if the unmoving statue, the staid classical visage, has burst into new life. Our statue was a “performing object,” such as those often found in liturgy – that is, it is a prop, a *thing* that nevertheless wants (in a sense) its own performative moment, possessing its own visual power.

The statue is one of several clues that I include that hints at the presence of angels, or more properly the idea of the angel, in the world. Throughout the play are laced pop songs (most of them bubbling from the genre that Nick was most connected to – music by bands with names like Aerosmith, Poison, Slaughter, etc.) that make prominent use of the term “angel,” even as throwaway love jargon. Music in general, often taken from the *Angels in America* film soundtrack, played a crucial role in this production and in the cinematic feel I felt it wanted.

My last touch was the feathers. In Scene Four, when Adam Tyler arrives in his apartment after his car accident, I inserted a brief bit of business. When he enters the scene, he finds his stereo playing – what else – “Just the Way You Are.” He immediately calls out, fearing an intruder, and then notices a white feather sitting atop his stereo. Stubbornly buttressed in his own anger – afraid to hope – he dismisses it and lets it flutter to the ground. Grace later leaves another in his hair when she heals him after the hate rally, and he disregards this as well.

Then, at last, comes the climax of the play, when the angels’ arrival reverses Adam’s tide of doubt in a single moment. Cued very specifically by the music, the angels are heralded by a torrent of hundreds of white feathers falling onto Adam from the rafters. And then, with the highest crescendo, Grace is lit brilliantly behind the scrim, which then lifts. I wanted to theatricalize a moment of conversion, of utter *metanoia*, that moment some of us are blessed enough to understand when our defenses wither away and there is only release, submission, and song.

At the end of the scene, hundreds more feathers, along with pictures of angels cut out by the cast, are dropped from the very roof of the theatre onto the audience. Thousands of fluttering angelic leaves and sparkling confetti – a massive spectacle intimately shared. The angelic white feather, a symbol that emerged entirely out of my family’s personal spiritual experience, became the dominant motif of the evening; they are pictured, drifting down, on the cover of the program.

The play started slowly, paced with songs and entrances. When Cyrus, Grace and Levi appear, the rhythm changed dramatically. David acted brilliantly, and his total

commitment inspired Gabby and Alex to new heights. They inhabited their roles and were completely theatrical, and the audience response was immense.

I had long felt (maybe for my own mental benefit) that the play's ultimate power would be made or broken by that last series of technical cues – music, feathers, lights and scrim, and then the fluttering downpour of pictures on the audience. Both encountered technical and practical obstacles on the evening of the performance. The feathers hadn't been loaded, and the Stadium Board of Directors tried to nix the downpour effect minutes before opening. The first problem required a black trench coat-wearing stage hand to rush out in the middle of the play, causing an extra long eleventh hour scene change; the second required much back-office debate and compromise, resulting in a downpour that was centered more over the orchestra pit – visible to the audience, but less tactile. But so be it – the cues went off like magic, the cathartic effect – for me – even greater for this obstacle course successfully navigated.

The entire cast materialized onstage. A furious standing ovation erupted, for which the actors were unprepared. What followed was another tonal shift, but one that was *supposed* to jar. Once the audience sat again, taking their cue from the silent actors, the cast read through the slow rhythmic wave of names.

This act highlighted my final unspoken concern about the evening. Namely, that on the anniversary of the fire, we were devoting an entire evening to the life and accomplishments of one of the victims, and essentially ignoring the fact that in his passing he was part of a larger community, a community that was observing the anniversary separately – and together. I needed to include this gesture and to do it right,

but nothing else in the show presented a more delicate dilemma. I thought initially that I would have Bill preface it with a short statement, which in retrospect seems tacky and apologetic – “Although this evening we honor the accomplishments of Nicky, we dedicate this show to all the victims and their families.” Another flash of insight, following the same lines as the last one (that is, that less is more) came to me just a few days before opening. I instructed that after the solemnity of the name reading, Bill was to silently bow his head, cueing the cast (and the audience) to do the same, and to allow a moment of silence. At the end of which, Bill was to lift his eyes and say only this:

“They walk among us.”

And the final songs began immediately – “Walk On,” which Bill sang standing in the brilliant circle of white feathers left behind from the play, and then the uncannily similar “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” from *Carousel*, which had, of course, just “popped” into Nick’s mind. The cast drifted downstage and proclaimed their song to the gathered.

In the flurry of handshakes and hugs and words that came after, I now recall very little. One comment stands out, delivered without much emotion but very sincerely by the father of one of the performers. He said, “I think that for a lot of people who might have lost faith because of this fire...I think what you guys did tonight might give them some of that faith back.”

And this - this was the work.

And like the finale of *The Song Of Mark*, Nicky’s song was now the song of an empty tomb.

Of all the headlines the press invented for us in the days after, a few stand out most strongly in my memory. The Associated Press article actually had the courage to lead with the boldly metaphysical “Youngest Victim’s Play Seems to Foreshadow Station Fire.” However, my favorite was the very next day’s lead story in Woonsocket’s local paper, *The Call*. Over a grand front page photo of our three brilliantly illuminated angels is a sea of darkness, the Kushneresque headline just read: “Angels in Woonsocket.”

V.

Epilogue:

As Much As You Want

“You might have noticed that the chalkboard in the diner had a specific saying written on it, under the all-you-can-eat angel food cake special.” Someone had noticed, and called it out: “You can have as much as you want.”

It was the cast party; these were my few prepared words. “From the time Nicky was very little, he was always completely willing to share what was his. At restaurants if someone wanted to try what he ordered, he’d always say, ‘You can have as much as you want.’ It became such a common little catchphrase that it was eventually shortened to just ‘Much as you want.’ Or ‘Muchasyouwant.’ From Nicky it spread to everyone else in my family. For the past several months, every one of you,” I said, “has been living that little philosophy of Nicky’s. You’ve all been constantly repeating, ‘anyone can have as much as they want.’ And honestly, that’s the strongest compliment that I can offer anyone. Thank you, thank you, thank you. That’s all.”

So here I am thinking, I'll just leave everyone with that nice thought. An hour later, I wondered that I shouldn't have taken the time to say a bit more. By then, a literal phenomenon had taken place.

First, the producer wanted a chance to speak briefly, and then so did other members of the support staff – all the usual thanks and praise. And then one of the actors stood up – I no longer remember who came first – and started to express his own feelings about this whole experience. And then, one after another, nearly everyone present took a turn to stand up and give some manner of what I would have to call *testimony*. This was a group in dire need of some processing. A flood had been unleashed – not unlike that downpour of little paper angels that had cascaded down on February 20.

For some it was just a sense of simple awe; others read poetry and shared in detail how the experience of doing this production had literally changed them. They ranged from the testimony of Pete, who said only, "I'm not at all a person of religion, but I'm starting to think that things happen for a reason, and that I was meant to be a part of all this," to Jane, weeping as she spoke about the joy of finally performing on stage with both of her children, as part of something so pure and positive, and of how each one of Nicky's little messages had so thoroughly shaken her. Or to Melinda, who told us that she had regained her faith because of February 20, just as the previous February 20 had stolen it away. Two of the girls – Hannah and another, Jillian – who had also not known Nicky, stood up and thanked us for giving them the chance to be a part of this, and to get to know Nicky through his legacy. Jillian described her amazement with Nicky, with how much he seemed to have done and accomplished in his eighteen years, and how she

wanted to emulate all that vast and eclectic achievement in her own life. She said also, speaking longer than almost anyone, that it seemed from the play that Nicky had lived by this “amazing philosophy” and that she had wished he had released some kind of handbook. But, she said, the Gospel reading at church that very morning had been about unconditional love, love of one’s enemies – and she concluded by holding up a Bible and saying, “Well, here’s your handbook.” I include this not because it was ever my intention to proselytize for Christianity, but because the connections this girl was able to make, and the broad positive impact this seemed to have on her was so impressive.

Nicky wasn’t Jesus, of course, and Jillian wasn’t exactly claiming that he was. But here I return to where I started. Our memorializing – how we chose to do it – was of a galvanizing theatrical nature. In effect, it seems that Nicky – like Ding, Kushner’s dead playwright – had become, in his glorified example, a mirror to everyone’s own hopes, ideals, aspirations and, of course, to their own mortality. If this is what Jillian saw in Nicky then this, I suppose, is how his life’s learning – or the one part of it that felt relevant to her – became a part of her life’s learning.

When it was done, I stood up one more time, out of the need to verbally *seal* all this. I merely said this: “You all remember that at the first rehearsal I said to you, on February 20 people’s lives will be changed. And I, by the way, knew that I was talking about you guys, too. Anyway, I just want to leave you with this: now you know you’ve done this. *Remember how this feels.* Now, that’s *really* all.’

The feeling sometimes called PRB – Post-Retreat Blues – set in with everyone. The return to the real world after such an event is like a slow immersion into cold water.

E-mails poured in – some from family and friends, others from distant acquaintances. One girl, Keri, told me how touched she had been just to see a picture of her and Nicky included in the slideshow (even though Nicky was making a ridiculous face with his tongue lolling out over her head). She said that after the show, she spent hours speaking with Matt, her old friend, and had found a new understanding about “what was really important in life.”

The next day, Hannah’s mother Suzanne sent me another e-mail. It described how her younger daughter, Emma, had just, days later, begun to process the implications of the show – and the permanence of physical death. Distraught, she told her mother, “I hope it’s like Nicky says it is.” This moved me perhaps more than anything else I had heard. But I had to laugh too – because this was my Nicky, my mom’s Nicky. The Nicky that had been kicked out of Encore for performing WWF moves on some church’s poor folding tables. The Nicky with whom I used to drive around Cranston beeping at pedestrians and bicyclists just to laugh at how badly we could startle them. And we hadn’t kept that Nicky a secret from anyone – we wanted his mischievous playfulness to be as much a part of our remembrance as it had been a part of his life. But Suzanne and her daughters, and Derek, and Keri, and Matt, and everyone, in the end, came to know the Nicky that they needed to know.

Suzanne also said that Hannah told her that she no longer fears death. Of all the comments we’ve heard as a result of both this and the first memorial service, this has been the most common, although perhaps never from one as young as Hannah. It has never been expressed as any kind of eagerness to reach death, merely a dismissal of the

pointless fear of it, bolstered by a hope that the universe has more to heaven and earth than is dreamt of in all our philosophies, or theologies, or sciences...or stories.

As for me, I achieved what I wanted more than anything – to give my mother safe passage through the agony of this anniversary, and to throw a party that Nicky would love and approve of, a cleansing event of music and theatre through which he and I might shed some light onto the lives of all these (to use Levi’s phrase) confused mortals – a group to which, I am proud to say, I still belong.

My mother received a plaque from the Stadium Theatre. It was to officially dedicate a new seat at the Stadium to Nicky and his play, seat N-14 (because there was no 41). The dedication concludes: “...from the cast of *A Night of Angels*. We do not fear to hope, and we know that *everything will be just fine*.”

Nick was fascinated by the ending of *Stand By Me*. From the time he first saw this film, he couldn’t believe that after all these four kids had been through, they just sort of walked away from each other, going back to their lives, with the implication that they would now drift out of each other’s lives. They had connected, they had even changed each other, only to have life gently tug them apart, in the way that life does. There is something so utterly true about this moment. In fact I can think of fewer Hollywood moments that feel more completely real.

This may be part of the inspiration for Michaiah’s speech in the diner scene. I’ll never (in this life) know for sure. I do know that this earlier this year, a great many

people's lives intersected for only a very short time, but were forever changed by the encounter. And they were equally changed by their encounter with Nicky, whom I chose, for countless reasons, to share with them, and along with him my life's deepest suffering. They were changed by their encounters with his characters, whom they understood – both Cyrus' boundless hyper optimism and Grace's frustration, both Adam Tyler's alienation and Levi's unflinching faith.

Nicky's life was a story that often told itself through his performances, and it continues to be. In the telling, I have had the chance to do the kind of work and spread the kind of message that I came into the profession of theatre to do. What I cannot do with honesty is to attempt to end this story with closure, because circles have no such things. Nicky's living presence in my life left a void that, I finally realized, could not be replaced by anything except for Nicky's continued presence – merely transmuted into a different form. His journey in this world, at turns blessed and sad, charmed and hurt, continues on, even as it takes him, before all the rest of us, to see the higher places; for him all the old mysteries are solved and no doubt replaced with new ones, unfathomable beyond unfathomable. And, like the Whos of Dr. Seuss' Whoville, he has made himself heard – and heard and heard and heard and *heard* – though he still can't be seen.

Meanwhile, all that we were, all that we are and all that we may yet be lives in me. I become his voice. His learning becomes my learning.

So sayeth Kushner's angel: "The Great Work begins."

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