

My brother would not smile for a photograph. He smiled now and then in life, he was even known to laugh, but never for a camera. Even when we were growing up, when he was a little boy, Nicholas knew how he wanted to be seen.

He knew how he was willing to be remembered. Any camera would alert my brother's instinct for posterity.

In the years that we had grandmothers, one of them was the kind who liked to compose grandsons within a frame in front of a Christmas tree. She liked to pose the smaller boy in front of the bigger boy, the bigger boy holding the smaller one, me holding Nicholas, my arms around him, enfolding him from behind.

The idea, I think, was that this embrace would make us look like brothers.

Ours was a weak resemblance.

Nicholas would look at himself in the red glass ornaments hooked to the boughs, the ones that were silver inside when they shattered. He could see himself in them and in the presents wrapped in shining paper at our feet. He could find his face in the heaps of packages, of which more than half, every year, were invariably for him. He would be himself up to a point, as much as Nicholas ever was himself, until our grandmother would say, “Say *cheese*.”

We could not, even in those years, either of us, believe that we had that kind of grandmother.

Nicholas said that she came from a bad family.

He did not say this in those years; he said it later, in the years when he was fond of calling things *de trop*.

One year—almost thirty years ago—while we were waiting for the *cheese*, Nicholas stood on my shoes and reached behind us both. He put his hands in my back pockets and squeezed handfuls of me, the biggest handfuls he could get, clutching through the cloth. He held on to me, his feet planted on mine, and he tipped his weight forward, leaning with it, not to make us fall, but as though he wanted to take flight without leaving me behind.

I pulled him to me and smelled soap on his skin, starch in his white shirt, and the wool smell of his short

gray trousers. I smelled tonic in his hair, and Listerine, and under them, I was sure, I smelled our mother's perfume. It may have only been the scent that her kisses left behind, but with his weight on me I imagined Nicholas looking at himself in our mother's mirror, splashing her Arpège into his hand, then lavishing it behind his ears, as she did. I could picture my brother stroking perfume on the pulse of his neck, with the thrill that is the point of the forbidden.

I imagined what must have been his rapture.

I squeezed him tighter, and while our grandmother squinted, trying to attach the flash, Nicholas took one hand from inside my pocket and forced it in between us.

He whispered, "Goose you!"

I felt his laughter in my feet. I felt it rise, I felt his laughter in his ribs, where I was holding him. My brother's laughter made me laugh. I felt it in his body, then in mine.

I thought our grandmother should have captured *that*. I thought that would have been a picture worth taking, worth having.

It would be worth having now.

Now it would be proof.

Nicholas and I were still laughing when she told us she was ready.

She called us *boys*.

She said *cheese*.

“*Cheese, boys,*” our grandmother said.

That was all it took to stop my brother’s laughter. Nicholas stepped down from my shoes. He folded his hands in front of his body and made them mimic a boyish repose. I watched his face change in the ornaments.

He changed it to a face that he had taught himself. It was a face that a little boy will learn to make after hearing too often that he is a beautiful little boy, in the same way that children who have been told that they are smart are apt to teach themselves to act it.

It was a face that said, “This is how I look.”

Our grandmother said that she was waiting for Nicholas to smile.

I kicked his foot and told him to do it. I told him that the smile would only be for her, that no one else would see it. I told him that it would not end up on the cover of *Photoplay* or anywhere else that would embarrass him.

I told him that a smile was nothing.

Nicholas stepped forward, a step away from me. Then he turned his face all the way around and gave me a look of everlasting patience that did not want to last.

“You are so *oblivious*,” he said. “How do I know who she’s going to *show* it to?”

He kept looking at me, kept giving me the look, and there was nothing else to see. There was nothing else in his face that I could make out under the look, and it occurred to me then, posing with my brother thirty years ago, that standing in front of me was a seven-year-old boy who had already vowed to show the world only the face that he wanted it to see and had done so at a time while he was still negotiating speech.

He stepped back, finally, into my embrace, turned to the camera and offered the unsmiling face, until our grandmother gave in and took the picture of Nicholas posing in the way he was willing to be seen.

There is no photograph of my brother standing on my feet. There is no photograph of my brother laughing. In the photographs from those years, in every one of them, I am the brother in the back, the one who always looks like any boy who ever smiled for a grandmother.

Nicholas is the one who always looks like Nicholas.



This is the room I thought that I would start in, and for the past several hours I have stayed in it, sitting on my brother's unmade bed, without starting.

I could start anywhere. Any room would do.

I could empty ashtrays, open windows, take down pictures, put books in boxes, check the kitchen for spoiled food. I could throw out old onions.

I could flip through the mail that has kept coming and pitch the junk.

I could pick my brother's clothes up from the floor and try them on for fit, then go through drawers and feel under folded clothes, under lining paper, for things he might have hid there.

Music could help me start, then help me hurry. I could hum "Moon River."

That would be a record Nicholas would have. In another room, records fill a wall of shelves that do not stop until the ceiling. Everything that I could ever want to play or sing along to is here for me to play. I could pick out Broadway scores and belt out the big numbers over the stars who belt them on the records.

Or, as I used to see my brother do when he was a little boy, I could lip-synch in the mirror. I could close my eyes the way I used to watch him do, making them look closed but, I was always sure, keeping a space to look through, his eyelash space, so that he could see what he looked like with his eyes closed.

Nicholas used to do that.

I do not know for a fact that he stopped doing it.

He used to pretend that pencils were long cigarette holders and would glide around rooms flicking ashes into flowerpots, saying things like, “Daddy, don’t be *droll*.”

That is something else my brother used to do.

I cannot say that I am sure he ever stopped doing it.

I cannot say for certain that he did not know he was being watched.

I cannot even say that my brother did not know I was the one who was watching.

There might be another way. Maybe I could pay to get this done, pay someone to pack up and empty this place out. There must be companies you can call, the way you do when you move, companies that come with cartons, with padded wrap, and do it for you.

There must be a way to get it done, without doing it yourself.

There must be a way to get it all behind you.

If not, someone has not been smart, someone has not been on the ball. Someone has overlooked a need, missed a calling, lost a chance, because doing this could be an industry.

Doing this could be a life.

But I do nothing that a company would do. I stay here, sitting on the cashmere blanket with the cigarette burn

in it, looking at objects around the room, my little brother's things as he left them.

Of course, I have looked a bit in other rooms, but I have chosen this room—if chosen it is what I've done—because this is the room with the best objects.

I do not mean “best” in the sense of necessarily to my taste, though I am thinking that I may take the lacquer table by the bed.

I can see myself in it.

Nicholas once told me the name for this kind of antique lacquer, for the old Japanese process that, over time, makes the black base show through in random patches under the red layers laid over it. The red is actually an orange-red, what is sometimes called Chinese red, but the name that Nicholas told me sounded Italian, not Japanese, not even Oriental, and it may have been that Nicholas did not know the real name.

Nicholas may have called it a name that the men who made it never called it.

I am wondering if Nicholas knew the name that the lacquer is called among the artisans. I am wondering if he ever got around to learning Japanese, as he used to threaten that he would one day, because he expected it would be fun to flirt with what he called little Japanese houseboys, what he called little Japanese comestibles.

Nicholas called most men little.

It was nothing against the Japanese.

Nicholas liked beautiful things. But he did not keep them beautiful. The lacquer is water-ringed from drinks he drank in bed.

I mean “best” in another sense.

I mean “best” in the sense that objects, particulars, things like cigarette burns in cashmere blankets and water rings on antique lacquer, can be said to cast a verdict on a life.

I am not saying they do.

I am saying they can be said to.

I myself would be inclined to say they do.

Nicholas knew a few things about lacquer. Years ago, he told me what he knew.

Lacquer comes from toxic sap. The sap comes from a tree that is called by different names around the world. Actually, there are different species of the tree. In Japan, for example, there is the *Rhus verniciflua*; in Thailand, in Burma, there is the *Melanorrhoea laccifera*. The trees are somewhat different, but their sap, I understand, is more or less the same. When raw, if touched, the sap will burn through skin. The sap must take in oxygen to lose the poison and is slow to do so at high altitudes, though

lacquer trees will grow high up. Lacquer trees will grow on mountains.

Sometimes the sap is mixed with ash, a vehicle for air. You will not often find lacquer that is pure.

The process that can force the black base through was invented by monks, by accident. It made their temple rich, their discovery of how to simulate the aging. They learned how to hasten nature and make layers wear away as though time had done it.

They learned to make it happen on command.

I expect, though, that my brother's table is the real item, lacquer aged the valued way, before the monks learned to coax the base, by artifice, to come up through the many sheer layers of red.

This lacquer table was a present from a man. For a number of years in his life, Nicholas attracted many presents.

I must make a note to have it appraised.

I must make a note to inquire what can be done about the water rings.

There must be a gentle technique.

I will make my notes in a minute.

There are objects on the lacquer and also objects in it. On it are two glasses, a half-empty bottle of tequila, and a glass ashtray filled up to the top with cigarettes smoked

down to the filters—different filters, one kind cork, one kind white—and many snapped nitrites mixed in among them.

The yellow box with the warning on it remains here by the bed.

I have not seen this kind, the old, snapping kind, for years. One sees the liquid now, in vials, if one sees anything. These are the kind that one can hardly buy now, hard to get, and there are more of them in this ashtray than I remember coming to a box.

I wonder—did Nicholas go through them, as it were, in one *sitting*, or did they, as things will, if allowed, accumulate?

I wonder if on nights he was alone, my brother looked at them, to remember nights that he had not been.

In the lacquer, I can see the underside of a dark linen lampshade, and up inside it, naked, the lightbulb it hides. I see picture frames, the pictures in them, prints of figures in kimonos, masked actors, courtesans, their blues and whites tinted by entrapment in the orange-red; and depending on where I move or how I lean, I can see, slanting in the flat surface, just up to the red obi tied tight around his waist, where the lacquer edge cuts it, the blown-up photograph of my brother posing, years ago, in a long black Japanese robe.

To see higher, to see the face, I need to look up from the lacquer to the wall, where it looks down, my brother's face, life-size within a mirrored frame.

Of course he does not smile.

In the mirrored frame, behind the light-splashed glass, my brother stands against a wall of skull-like faces carved in stone. His pose includes a cigarette, white filtered, and a hollow-stemmed champagne glass that he is holding to his neck, just below the jawline.

Nicholas prized his jawline; he prized all his bones.

The obi is tight around what was then a smaller- than-boyish waist.

A champagne bottle stands on a dried-out patch of grass at my brother's feet. The bottle is turned name-side to the camera and has a year on it. The year on the bottle, of course, would not be the year of the photograph. The year of the photograph would have been a proper year to drink the vintage. The proper year to drink a vintage is the kind of thing that Nicholas made it a point to know.

The bottle at my brother's feet is labeled 1962, and I would guess that it would have to be five or six years older than the photograph, at least, though this is not the kind of thing I make a point of knowing.

The cigarette between my brother's fingers is smoked to a photogenic length of ash and is held at an angle that

was, even then, a dated way to hold a cigarette. But it is clear that Nicholas meant to feature his hands.

Someone must have told him that he had beautiful hands.

Nicholas did have beautiful hands, and the only word that I can think of for the way he holds the cigarette is, I am afraid, demure.

There are other words, of course, but demure will have to do.

What I wondered, until I realized that it was not a question, was why a thirty-seven-year-old man would have displayed, life-size in his bedroom, in sight of his bed, in a mirrored frame on a mirrored wall, and mirrored all around by other walls, a photograph of himself looking like a twenty-two-year-old boy, or even younger, nineteen, eighteen, because Nicholas spent most of his life looking younger than he was.

You may have noticed that this is often true of men over-cherished in childhood, common, for example, among favored sons—an exemption from the first shocks of aging that is a hallmark of the self-regarding.

