

08/05/17 12:13

Title Page – His Place in the Sun

HIS PLACE IN THE SUN

A NOVEL

BY

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Chapter 1 – Wakes in his apartment

Nicholas Martin, 1986 Leinster debating champion, Bachelor of Arts (second class), and apple of his mother's eye, shivered nervously in his twin bed. He pulled the covers until they were tightly wrapped around him, cocooning for warmth, his body in fetal position. One hairy foot protruded to test the temperature. It withdrew quickly inside like a nervous rodent peering from its hole only to scamper back within.

His oversized cranium nestled snugly in one arm. It housed the brain that posed most excellent questions in high school. Father Morrissey wrote in his report that Nicholas was "a gifted, insightful child" adding "the sky was the limit with a boy like that."

The report card was kept along with other chosen mementos. He stored them in a Jacob's biscuit tin in the closet, opening it only when the world was unforgiving. Then he reviewed each, handling it reverently, carefully re-reading those past words of promise.

Now he drifted still on a warm balm of sleep. The covers rippled, a swell of blue on the ocean of his bed, as he turned over. A hand surfaced to massage his nose, pointed in relief. It ranged over the wildly tousled hair; sheer forehead and wide cheeks, caressing pools of green deep set beneath furry eyebrows.

"He'll be President some day, my Nicholeen. Won't you?" He'll show you, my Nicholeen. looked like JFK his mother said.

A drunk was singing on the street below. A bottle dropped and smashed. The singing stopped. It resumed, breaking in on his thoughts. His voice carried bawdy and shrill, as he staggered home to his bed before dawn. Above Nicholas's head, the lights of a passing car played across the bedroom wall.

The rising sun as the room gradually gave up its secrets to the new day. Small and simply furnished. "Temporary digs only" was how he described it to Sonia when he first moved in. It was just a means to an end. As soon as he got his act together he'd get one of those condos on Lakeshore Drive, or down by Navy Pier.

Soon the clothes rumpled on the chair tossed carelessly the night before. The hanging jackets in the closet lost their sinister shapes becoming cheap suits, marked down in the sales. The fading shadows uncovered a desk buried in a mess of unopened letters, newspapers and magazines. Random heaps of paper spilled onto the floor below it. Some were liberally covered in red ink and stamped "overdue" in bold capitals. Some attempt was made to order them, once, but now they merged into a formless mound. A battered stereo peaked out from underneath, partially hidden. The carpet was mottled beige like the coated lungs of a compulsive smoker.

The alarm went off suddenly without warning shattering the silence to pieces. A skinny arm shot out from the covers and slammed down on the clock. There was silence.

08/05/17 12:13

He cautiously opened sleep-encrusted eyes. Their greeny-blue lens contracted harshly in the morning light. He lay, motionless, the bland white of the ceiling engulfing his vision. Its geography was as familiar to him as a city map.

A long crack ran from the light fitting, meandering through wetlands where water leaked in before splitting into many tributaries. Some petered out lost in spider's webs. Others disappeared from view crossing the border of his vision beyond the curtain.

Could easily have been the sight that he woke to as a boy. The color was the same. It might have been his home in Donnybrook. Any moment his mother would call him to come down for breakfast. If he were very late she would tramp up the stairs and rattle the bedroom door.

"Nicholas, your porridge is getting cold."

He always hated porridge.

The big splotch of grey in the corner of the ceiling gave it away. Water had leaked in last winter and his landlord; Mr. Murphy had finally fixed the tiles on the roof. He said he was going to repaint the ceiling too but somehow never got around to it.

He was full of excuses. They were varied and complex.

First his wife was having her second child and he was needed at home. Then it was summer and he went to Milwaukee for the Irish festival. It was an annual pilgrimage. An urbanized Irishman like Nicholas wouldn't have any interest in the Gaelic culture, he knew. The British beat that crap out of them a long time ago. Mr. Murphy, by contrast, took his heritage very seriously.

In the end Nicholas gave up asking him.

No, it was the ceiling in his apartment. The boy had begrudgingly become a man. The passage of time had given him a resounding kick into manhood. There was no security such as mother's big florid face and strong almost masculine arms might provide. She no longer stood between him and an unforgiving world. She was thousands of miles away a romantic vision of her son firmly implanted in her mind.

It was Monday. The charade of his job, of his life was about to begin all over again.

In less than an hour he would have to be at work. He groaned quietly. It was too early. Much too early to get up. Another few minutes of sleep were crucial, vital to his well being. He begrudged each second of wakefulness. His head throbbed with a dull, numbing sensation. He drifted off to sleep.

The alarm sounded again. The pale-grey of a winter's morning shone feebly through the chinks in the blind. His clothes lay bundled in a heap where he had left them the night before. He knew it was cold. He could sense it in the sharp intake of his breath, the numbness of his exposed flesh and the faintest of plumes formed by his breath. Winter had come early and had fallen hard. The world outside his bed was frigid and uninviting.

08/05/17 12:13

His room was a mess. The dull grey winter's morning exposed the double bed. It was too big for the room. He bought in a fit of largesse one bored, Sunday afternoon. There was one chair. It doubled as a resting-place for his clothes. On the wall hung a Monet print. Sonia gave it to him for his twenty-ninth birthday. She was always trying to brighten up his apartment. He would live in complete squalor if it weren't for her.

Sonia bought "meaningful gifts." These were gifts purchased with care. They demonstrated a sincere interest in another person's needs. Nicholas was guilty of buying meaningless gifts. She succeeded after many conversations and complaints to correct that deficiency. Thereafter, dutifully each year, he made subtle and not so secret inquiries of her friends and relatives. One year her mother, who was intimately involved in Sonia's life, told him that a set of wine glasses from Marshall Fields was acceptable proof of his interest. Next year it was a CD player. At least it showed he cared.

"Some people need to be shown how" she told her daughter.

In front of the window, but only a foot from the bed, stood the desk. It was a source of shame and guilt. For six months he sat there religiously every evening. The result of that prodigious labour lay in the bottom drawer.

Dog-eared and greasy it was a hundred pages of his first and only novel. It was a vague, autobiographical tract full of digressions and tangents. It was laced with the bitterness of an undiscovered talent. Even in its heyday it maintained a love-hate relationship with its creator. Bursts of activity were followed by long, fallow periods.

Often he reread what in another frame of mind had seemed like incisive prose, only to discover that his characters were cardboard cutouts and his writing was plagued by long-winded and ineptly constructed sentences.

Lately he had, like most unpleasant facts in his life avoided it altogether. The drawer remained closed. The idea of reopening it filled him with dread.

He dragged himself out of bed. Seven forty-five. He was already late. He fumbled for the door of the bathroom. The tiles felt cold under his bare feet. He turned to contemplate his visage in the mirror. He was thirty and looked every bit of it. He smiled deliberately at himself, forcing the corners of his mouth into a mirthless grin. Thirty years old. He tried to ponder the significance of that. He took a razor out of the cabinet, behind the mirror. He inspected it critically, unsure how many times he had used it. Finally he rejected it in favour of a new one. At least he would face the world clean-shaven.

Thirty. Thirty. What did it mean? Did it have to mean anything? What had he achieved in thirty years? He paused his razor held in mid-air.

08/05/17 12:13

Einstein had already published four research papers. Beethoven had a few symphonies under his belt. Hemingway was a successful writer. What had he, Nicholas Martin, to show for thirty years on the planet?

He swore loudly as the razor cut into his chin. Fuck! Fuck! He yelled at the mirror.

Something would turn up. It had to. With mechanical optimism he reassured himself.

Shaving completed he placed the new razor at the corner of the shelf beside the toothpaste. He stepped gingerly into the bathtub. He stood farthest from the shower. With his outstretched foot he grappled the handle and turned. A jet of freezing cold water shot out of the faucet. He waited the prerequisite fifteen seconds using his toe as a thermometer. Satisfied he stepped forward. The now steaming hot water enveloped him. He let himself relax. A warm sensation gradually rose up inside him. Suddenly the water ran cold. That fat bitch!

His neighbour below, Miss Denker, had just turned on her shower. He could hear her ignorant feet stomping around in the tub. Only last week she had cause to complain about something.

He dreaded her large oval-shaped face full of suffering and patient martyrdom.

She caught him on the stairs one day after work.

"Mr. Martin, could I have a word?"

He knew what was coming. She always prefaced her gripes in this manner. She had many gripes.

This one concerned a drunken night that Nicholas could remember only in flashes.

Weekday drinking was rare for him. Work was unbearable hung over. He was too restless one Tuesday night. He had to get out if only for one drink. He walked the few blocks to the Sheffield.

There were few patrons. People were dotted about in small groups of two or three. It was quiet. He sat at the bar paying little attention to his surroundings. After three or four drinks he felt the warm glow of inebriation numb his senses. His anxiety lifted. He felt relaxed and affable. It was after his fourth or fifth, he had long since ceased to count that he became engaged in conversation with Cheryl. After that everything was blurred. He had woken the following morning with a massive hangover, Cheryl by his side.

Old pie-face no doubt was up half the night listening to God knows what. In a way he felt sorry for her. Her interest in men was overwhelming, and her criteria were not exacting. Even Nicholas initially was included in her list. Even though he had quickly disabused her of that notion. Still she was capable of anything. One word to Sonia could be disastrous. He knew the power of an embittered woman.

That morning she had adopted a frosty tone, known only to the sexually chaste.

08/05/17 12:13

"I would appreciate it "she snarled, curling a hairy upper lip, "if you could confine your carousing to the weekend nights, specifically Friday and Saturday."

With that she was gone, into her lair the door slammed behind her. Mindful of the consequences he had dashed off a groveling note which her shoved under her door later that evening.

"Dear Miss Denker,

I want to apologise for any disturbance I may have caused you last night. It is not my usual custom to make noise during the week. I can assure you that it will not happen again.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Martin."

Fat bitch. Cursing Nicholas turned off the shower and stepped out. It was probably eight already. Wrapped in a towel he stood otherwise naked in front of the wardrobe. Clean shirts were out. There were none. Doing laundry was more boring than work. Almost. The favourite one he looked at wistfully. No. Two days last week he had worn it. He finally compromised and chose the striped one. All that was left was his second favourite suit. The first was being cleaned. He checked the clock. 8:15.

A sudden shiver of urgency ran down his spine. Seizing his coat and hat he made for the door. The fat girl was ahead of him on the stairs. He was forced to make his dash a walk, as he followed in her wake. He danced this way and that finally managing to slip by her at the front door. She gave his friendly nod a parting glare as he turned to the right her to the left. Once out the door the cold hit him a blow. Clarke Street was bleary and windswept. His face bent low against the sweeping wind. He shuffled down the snowbound street, a tall, frail and slightly forlorn figure.

From all about people converged on the station. Nicholas merged with the crowd. He thrust his dollar fifty at the attendant and passed through the turnstile. He stood on the platform, the Chicago wind cutting through the station.

Around him the early morning commuters jostled. The smart ones moved towards the end of the platform where the cars were less likely to be jammed with people. Nicholas stood where he emerged, determined not to follow the trend.

So this was it. The be all and end all. Nicholas Martin. Six years in America. Lured by the American dream, of unlimited prosperity and material well being, and a general dissatisfaction with his homeland, gets to freeze his tits off on an icy platform. The Ravenswood train swept into the station, momentarily obscuring the blast of cold air. He dived into the nearest car, managing to gain a position pressed up against the door. Compressed against the window he began the long logical process of justifying his position. It was an elaborate sequence with many steps and subroutines,

08/05/17 12:13

with the efficacy of a computer program. It went something like this. Yes it's true I've been in the United States for six years, and I don't particularly like my job, or my lifestyle, and I don't love my girlfriend, but at least it is a life. And anyway where would I go and what would I do? I don't want to be unemployed in Ireland, living at home with my mother. The program crashed temporarily as the train swept into Fullerton. A loud, aggressive and diminutive Asian lady shouted "Owt, pliss. Owt!!" Nicholas stepped out of the train to let her out.

The program resumed as the train started to move. But I can live anywhere I want and to do anything I please. Yes you can retorted the program, but will it make you any happier that you are right now? The best thing you can do the program continued, is sit tight. This dissatisfaction is only a passing mood, anyway. In an hour, a day, a week, you'll have forgotten it. Be realistic. You're not one of the great ones. Not every one can be a superstar.

The train came to a stop at Jackson station. Nicholas was swept along in a general exodus. He emerged onto State Street walking quickly. His destination was a large, squat building. The sign above the entrance displayed in unambiguous terms "The Northern Trust ". Herein lay the location of Nicholas's career ambitions for five years where the great dream of fulfillment and social usefulness had been exploded in favour of the boredom and general futility of office life. Certainly Nicholas had not always felt this way. He had once (somewhat naively) believed that his contribution was significant in its own right. That he Nicholas Martin could make a difference. Be a force for change in his job and find a role worthy of his unique talents. That dream like so many others had died a death at the bitter hand of reality. For the umpteenth time as he crossed the foyer headed for his bank of elevators (floors 19 - 36) the thought crossed his mind. It doesn't matter a damn if I'm here or not. If a bus hit me tomorrow some other stiff would fill my shoes. He jostled into the elevator managing to select his floor before being pushed to the back of the car. He adopted a suitably inscrutable expression as the doors closed and in found him in close proximity to complete strangers. He remembered reading somewhere a study of human behavior. A researcher was interested in how people behaved in elevators. He contrived to be the first in the door and always adopted a stance facing the back of the car. Invariably everyone who followed would face the same way.

Nicholas liked studies like that. There was a part of him that always pushed for differentness. A sense of distinction beyond what his social standing deserved. The door opened on the thirtieth floor and Nicholas was ejected into the hallway. A sign on the wall with a pointing arrow read, "Northern Trust, Operations Department". He followed the arrow and entered the office. He kept his eyes low avoiding eye contact. He was ten minutes late he knew and he didn't want any acknowledgment of this fact to come from him. Foregoing his usual coffee from the machine he made straight for his desk.

"You're late, Nicholas."

08/05/17 12:13

It was Tony Ryan, his immediate superior. He was always an enigma to Nicholas. He viewed him as a man utterly content with his life and his job. Even deriving a certain satisfaction from his work. Ryan was the prototypical working man. Full of pride and critical of all other men who didn't share his background. He maintained a curious affection for Nicholas, despite the fact that Nicholas was a 'college boy', and therefore born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Maybe it was an ethnic bond. Ryan was an Irish-American. His family constituted an earlier wave of immigration into America. He, like others of his background, had been brought up on a garbled version of their Irishness, full of unrealistic notions and vague romanticisms. Whatever the reason he seemed to have developed a liking for Nicholas, unusual for a man so definite in his opinions. That notwithstanding Ryan was a man with a strong sense of duty. Tardiness was something he could never tolerate. There was a way in which he construed such violations as a personal insult to him. With a sinking heart Nicholas knew that a lecture was imminent.

"Nicholas, how many times have you been late in the last month?" said Ryan warming to his theme.

"Oh, I'm sorry I'm late. I..."

"Nicholas I'm asking you a question. How many times have you been late?" Ryan was nothing if not pedantic.

"Twice" he suggested.

"At least four times that I know of. And I'm sure Ken would know of others."

(Ken was Ryan's boss. The head cashier. Ryan regarded him as the highest authority, the Supreme Court to which all unresolved disputes between employees were referred for arbitration.)

"Nicholas, you have to start being on time. The market opens at nine. I need you at your desk." The market was a deified term for Ryan. It was the great shining star of his life. The sun around which he and Nicholas, and anyone else who "had their head screwed on the right way", orbited.

"I know Tony" said Nicholas, (it always struck him as odd that despite their meanness to each other, they would still address each other by their first name), "I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I promise."

"It better not" said Tony.

Nicholas busied himself with his work. Already there was a pile of paper on his desk. In a strange way he enjoyed the wholly mechanical aspects of his job. It was so unambiguous. There was no necessity for thought, and it was rarely that Nicholas managed to avoid his own thought processes. He inclined his large head to one side and let his brain relax.

Through the glass wall of his office, Ken Schaumburg watched Nicholas. Ken was an 'achiever' by his own admission. He was the titular head of operations. (In reality his responsibilities were slight, but he took them very seriously). In another life Ken would have been the power-hungry security guard, jealously guarding a doorway, and exerting the utmost power that his office permitted. Ken had by dint of ass-kissing, sneakiness and crass manipulation achieved a

08/05/17 12:13

position of authority and he intended to enjoy it. He regarded Nicholas with the customary disdain he showed to all his employees. He was possessed of the proverbial zeal of the poacher turned gamekeeper. He kept a securely locked drawer at his desk. In it he had compiled meticulous dossiers of every one under his tutelage to be used only in time of emergency. When it came to apportioning blame Ken knew well that the cutting axe could fall in any direction and no one, he included was immune. In his files, neatly ordered alphabetically, you would find if you looked under "Martin, N." a Photostat of every progress report Nicholas had received. Some years earlier he had noted that "Nicholas, while seeming to possess a good aptitude, lacked application and had a tendency to day-dream." In consequence he could not in all honesty, "recommend him for promotion to a position of greater responsibility."

The morning whiled away uneventfully. Ken came out of his office a few times, to monitor his underlings at closer quarters. He had a tendency to stand behind Nicholas and look over his shoulder, a habit Nicholas found intensely irritating.

He was a small, diminutive man, but he made up for his small stature by a large expansiveness, studiously cultivated over the years. A wispy moustache struggled for life on his upper lip. Today to Nicholas's relief he turned his attention to Tony.

There was a breach of procedure. Ken would say no more. Negligence was suspected. Obviously Ken would have to file a report to a higher authority. The bigwigs upstairs would have to be informed. Ken had no idea would happen, or how 'upstairs' would react. Tony was implicated. The two retired into Ken's office. A heated conversation ensued which Nicholas watched through the window. It consisted of Tony expostulating, arms held aloft in a gesture of injured pride and Ken remonstrating by turn. A conference call was made to another brokerage house, to settle the dispute between the two captains of operations. The doctrinal issues, it transpired were erudite and complex and not readily amenable to a simple yes or no, a black or white answer. The two combatants retired to regroup for lunch, and nurse their wounds. Tony had held his corner for the most part though Ken, to his credit, had administered a few stinging blows of rebuke. Nicholas suspected that Ken completely staged these periodic inquisitions to assert his ever-tenuous authority. He used the temporary lull in hostilities to make a break for lunch. He had been in the habit of meeting Sonia for lunch but lately he had abandoned this in favour of his own company. She was full of talk about marriages and engagements, of this friend having purchased a dress of less than a thousand dollars, a real bargain, or that friend having honeymooned in Paris. It was all so romantic and so utterly mundane. Nicholas for his part viewed marriage with unvocalized fear. It wasn't so much the business of marriage itself. Rather it constituted a reminder to him that time was passing. His twenties had gone and very soon he would be forced onto the horns of another dilemma. Sonia had christened him lately as Nicholas 'Delay' Martin, referring to his evasiveness on the whole issue. Very soon now, he well knew things would come to head. The biological clock was

08/05/17 12:13

ticking and he would have to produce the goods. In the face of uncertainty he did what he always did and opted for the status quo. He was, in reality, a conservative. In fairness he was fond of Sonia, and despite the occasional infidelity, such as his night with Letica, had quite a fondness for her. He concluded that it was all too much to consider, especially on a Monday morning. His head hurt. Maybe he was coming down with something. Last thing he needed right now was to come down with something.

The elevator took him down to the foyer. Rather than face the cold outside. Nicholas betook himself to the restaurant on the ground floor. He joined the line, which snaked out into the lobby. When his turn came he opted for the soup sandwich combo. He made his way to a vacant table at the rear of the restaurant. He needed some time to think, to re-marshal some facts in his head. There was too much outside stimuli. He was just beginning time-consuming process when he heard a voice, which made his heart drop.

"I assume this is free, Nick". He turned around just in time to see Peter bumble into the free seat, his large ass oozing out of the gaps in the metal frame. Peter worked in the accounting department. "Oh man, we had a major fuck-up this morning. Warren was raging. It turns out someone screwed up when entering the price per share, on three hundred trades that's a ten thousand-dollar error. No one said anything. Walter said he keep us in all fucking night till someone owned up."

A small piece of ham sandwich flew out of his mouth and hit Nicholas on the cheek. Nicholas was too polite to say anything. Peter continued unaware.

"What's going on in your department? I heard Ken and Tony were at it, again." "Oh, you know, the usual"

"Warren was bitching about Tony this morning" said Peter.

"Oh."

"Between you and me there's going to be a shakedown, very soon. Number One himself is taking an interest." Number One was a name that Nicholas rarely heard without some tremor of anticipation. He was the progenitor, the founder of the company. He was the first. Before him there was nothing. He molded and shaped the world in which Peter lived. He had set the parameters on all of their lives. They owed their very livelihoods, even their lives to this man. In Peter's parlance he took on an almost Biblical aura, significance on a par with Moses or David guiding the people of Israel to the Promised Land. Nicholas didn't comment.

Peter carried on munching cheerfully.

"How's that girl you're dating? What's her name?" he asked.

"Sonia" he said helpfully.

"Sonia. That's it. Good-looking girl. Good-looking girl."

In truth Nicholas suspected the real reason for this inquiry into his welfare was to introduce Peter's other favourite topic of conversation, his girlfriend, Barbara.

08/05/17 12:13

"You've met Barbara, haven't you?"

Nicholas nodded in the affirmative. He remembered vaguely being introduced to a small, plain-looking girl at the Christmas party. Her name was Barbara and worked in the personnel department. In fact she was one of the first people Nicholas met when he interviewed with the company.

"She just got a promotion" Peter beamed with pride. "Five years with the company. Her official title now is Vice-Co-Ordinator of Human Resources. "He paused on this last part to allow the full significance of it to sink in.

"Oh, tell her congratulations. I've got to get back "said Nicholas, glancing at his watch to justify his departure.

"We must go out for a drink sometime." Peter called after him as he left.

"Sure, anytime " said Nicholas. The last thing in the world he felt like doing was spending his spare time with that guy.

Nicholas jealously guarded his free time, greatly resenting any inroads made by the outside world. He made his way across the lobby and back into the elevator.

His mind was in turmoil again. He had desperately wanted his lunchtime on his own to think. There was never enough time to think anymore. There were so many demands on his time these days. Work, Sonia, Peter, Tony. A man had to fight for his own breathing space. Nicholas was never very good at doing that. He was too polite for a place like Chicago. Born in Dublin he had been educated at a Jesuit college. The main legacy of those days seemed to have been his manners. He still recalled Father Morrissey's description of him as "unfailing polite". Nicholas was a nice guy. He talked to people who bored him stupid. Conversed to the point where they had no idea what he really thought, and would come away convinced they had made a life long friend. That was another legacy of those formative days in Dublin. Nicholas hid his true feelings. Somewhere along the way he had picked up the idea that any strong emotion was naturally suspect. Fools and imbeciles felt strongly about things. Nice, well-adjusted people were not prey to emotion. The pure light of reason illuminated their lives.

The office seemed unusually quiet after lunch. Tony and Ken were no-where to be seen. Tony's usual procedure at this time was to adjourn to the bathroom, where he would spend ten to fifteen minutes administering to the call of nature. Nicholas would hear the rustling of the sports section of the newspaper coming from the cubicle at the back, accompanied by a pretty foul smell.

There was very little work to be done at this point.

At times such as these his thoughts generally returned to himself. He felt he was a curious breed. Not American but hardly Irish either in his habits or opinions. He had made an unsuccessful attempt at integration and the resulting cross breed was the outcome. His cultural antecedents existed somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. He really didn't want to be anything, have to accomplish

08/05/17 12:13

anything or prove anything. He was always called upon, forced to prove himself. Prove things to him, to Sonia, to the world. He just wanted to exist, and to be left alone. He never imagined when he was younger that it could have become such an issue for him. He fondly recalled his student days. Students had it easy. They existed in an egalitarian world where words such as status and prestige held no currency. He cast his mind back fondly to his student days in Dublin. Then he was full of unfulfilled promise, untempered by the vagaries of the world, confident in his opinions and unquestioning of his ability to fulfill them.

Somewhere since then doubt had crept into his mind and made a home for itself there. The passage of time had something to do with it. Nicholas's youth had been full of grandiose notions of changing the world. Only time had revealed to Nicholas that the world didn't want to be changed, and had no desire to conform to his expectations.

Tony came back from the bathroom.

"The Nicks are going to win the Stanley Cup.," he said, for want of anyone better, to Nicholas. Sports. Now there was another thing Nicholas hated. Playing sports he could understand. But following a team, reading the sports section of a newspaper, day in and day out, knowing who won the Super Bowl in 1974. Who cared? It was so mindless and boring. It reminded him of wet Sunday afternoons, when he was eleven years old. His older brother Michael would insist on watching soccer on the TV. This would invariably lead to a big fight. Then he would have to sit, beaten into submission, while the Pool Results were read out.

"That's good," said Nicholas. "That's your team, right?"

Tony didn't answer. He had adopted the idea, somewhere that ignoring people was a good way to impress them. Frequently he would do that when Nicholas addressed a question to him. Even though there was no doubt in Nicholas's mind that Tony had heard him. Nicholas didn't pursue the matter. Social conversations with Tony always made him nervous. After a few sentences the idea of conversing with his underlings on an equal level would seem incongruous to Tony, and he would come over to Nicholas's desk and find fault with something he was doing. The best situation Nicholas, always felt, was when Tony was preoccupied with something else. Then they were both spared the embarrassment of trying to find common ground, when in reality none existed.

The rest of the day seemed to pass without incident. Ken did not reappear in the afternoon, and Tony got into a protracted argument on the phone with an airline representative. Apparently he had left a pair of shoes on a Delta flight from New York. The agent in true American tradition was adopting the expedient that the customer was always right - a terrible mistake when dealing with Tony.

"I told you, already, it was Flight 478 out of Newark. Jesus Christ. Who's your superior? Put your superior on the line. What's your name? Look Michelle, I'm trying to make a point. No don't interrupt. Michelle, don't interrupt. I haven't finished... "

08/05/17 12:13

The barrage faded a little into the background. Nicholas was eyeing the clock on the wall. He never wore a watch. A watch made time slow down and Nicholas did not want to know the time at work. He started shuffling papers on his desk. This ritual usually began about 15 minutes before his departure. In so doing he ensured that come the appointed time he would have no more work in process, and would be out the door like a shot.

He busied himself with final preparations. At five he rose from his desk. The elevator was crowded. He left early enough to avoid walking out with Tony. He might have suggested a drink thereby putting Nicholas in the embarrassing situation of saying no. For Nicholas it was much easier to avoid him altogether. He heaved a sign of relief as he made it out into the street unnoticed.

He joined the rush hour melee. He wondered vaguely what a visiting space ship from another planet would make of human culture. From above the trends might be more obvious. At a certain time in the morning the aliens would observe a period of frenetic activity. Minute life forms (so many ants) would emerge from hiding. Around certain locations concentrations of these lifeforms would be clearly discernible. What attracted so many of these beings to certain distinct geographic points would be a matter of speculation and uncertainty for the alien visitors. Perhaps some very attractive food source was located there. And then another curiosity. After this period of intense traffic, quiet. To reemerge later and return to their original locations. Evidence of intelligent life? Nicholas felt sure the findings would be inconclusive.

The train was particularly crowded this evening. He was forced to stand in the aisle. A woman in front of him was reading from a book. He had to admire her persistence. Despite the constant swaying of the car she remained rigidly focused on the page, one hand held aloft clutching the rail. From his vantage of 6 feet and 1 inch, he could easily look over her shoulder.

He read, 'David held Joanne passionately in his arms. She could feel the pounding of his heart as she pressed close to him. She seemed to dissolve into powerful embrace. She felt...'

The woman half-turned and Nicholas quickly looked away. He felt an involuntary color rise to his cheeks. Another legacy from his student days. At the slightest impropriety he tended to blush. In a way he sympathized with the woman. There was as much insight into love in a Mills & Boon novel as he had ever learned. Buying into the notion of romantic love was as good a bet as any. Still Nicholas preferred to hedge his bets. Love or libido. He wasn't quite sure which.

He got out at his stop and walked the couple of blocks to his apartment. When he got in the light was blinking on his answering machine. Sonia. It had to be. He could hear Miss Denker stomp around upstairs. He narrowly missed her at the doorway. The floor reverberated above his head. Sonia could wait. They were supposed to go out to dinner tonight. He just needed a few minutes of downtime first. He slumped into the couch and switched on the TV. It was one of those interminable chat shows where the audience got involved. The main attraction or centerpiece was a virgin mother who had had two children by invitro-fertilization. She had certainly circumvented the

08/05/17 12:13

dilemmas posed by romantic love. The main entertainment seemed to consist of various members of the audience haranguing the unfortunate woman, to general applause. She sat impassively clutching her two children. Nicholas was alternately appalled and fascinated. His Catholic upbringing did not prepare him for such eventualities. A virgin mother, the last one he knew of was Mary. With his outstretched foot he reached for the answering machine.

On the television an overweight, black lady, stood up.

"What you did was unnatural. You should know better than to do that invitro thing. What you need is a man, young lady." She sat down in response to cheers and sporadic clapping. She certainly had some conviction in her voice.

The machine beeped and clicked.

"Hi, Nicholas. It's me. I'm at my mother's house right now, but I'll be at your place at eight. Let's go somewhere different. Maybe downtown. We haven't been there in a while."

That was Sonia. Always trying to suggest things. She prided herself on the improvements she had made on Nicholas since she first met him. She was the one who encouraged him to move out of that crummy apartment on Halsted, selected all his furniture, and introduced him to the concept of a colour scheme. He needed to be brought out of himself more often.

He switched off the television. He was restless. It was still another hour before Sonia would arrive. He passed around the apartment. The living room led directly into the bedroom and bathroom. He paused in front of the mirror. His face seemed somehow alien. He never associated his personality with a certain appearance, a given physical form. The slightly oversized head, dominant nose and wide cheeks seemed familiar. It was the frame containing the universe within. But only the surface.

He walked out into the bedroom. The bed was half made evidence of his hasty departure that morning. He glanced sidelong at the desk. It was in times such as these that he had sat at the desk. He turned toward the drawer. On impulse he opened it and took out the manuscript. The first page had originally been a typed sheet. It was a mass of handwritten corrections, in various coloured pens. Like layers of cracked paint it overlaid the original, each layer telling a history of its own. In the left-hand margin he had written in red ink; 'For some time now he had been on a downward spiral. Nothing sudden or definite. Just a gradual unraveling of the threads of his life'. A long arrow led from the note to a point in the middle of the page.

The doorbell buzzed. Sonia. He put the manuscript back in the drawer. The doorbell buzzed a second time. Jesus Christ, relax. He pressed the buzzer on the inside of the front door. Below he could hear her stomping up the stairs.

She bustled into the apartment.

"It took me ages to park. I ended up on Belmont Avenue. It's thirty minute parking only."

Sonia. Sonia. She could hardly be described as beautiful though judging by the reactions of others she was regarded as pretty enough. Nicholas had long since ceased to have an opinion. She was tall, blonde and blue-eyed and was inclined to be plumpness. She exuded certain sensuality. All things sexual fascinated and entertained her. She was constantly regaling Nicholas with details of the sexual exploits of her friends and family. Nicholas had always maintained a certain prudish exterior regarding these matters, particularly in the company of women. Engaging in sexually an explicit conversation was something gentlemen (at least the kind of gentlemen the Jesuits tried to create) didn't do. If the lady wished to do so then that was her prerogative, in keeping with the other great maxim of non-judgmentality. Sonia was the proto-typical 'good girl'; any guy should be thrilled to have.

Nicholas wouldn't have described the emotion he felt for her as love. But then on the other hand he wasn't exactly sure what that was. In the back of his mind he imagined it to be an overpowering sensation, full of passion and verve. That was certainly not the way he felt about Sonia. He knew with a certain resignation that she was the kind of girl who suited him best. Loyal, kind, honest and not given to wide mood swings or tempers. She was predictably nice. She would cause him minimum stress in life. Stress minimization was an issue of some importance to Nicholas these days. If the damaging components of his life could not be removed they could at least be contained. Hedged around with some protective sheen or exterior.

"How was work?" she inquired.

"Oh same as ever. You remember Peter, don't you?"

"I think so."

"Well, he cornered me at lunch. Started babbling about work as usual. He's such a bore."

"Nicholas, you're so critical of people. He's not that bad."

That was typical Sonia. Always thinking the best of people. Nicholas included. He wondered how she would react to news of his infidelities. There hadn't been many. Just a handful over the years. Drunken nights of passion. He adopted the happy principle of feeling guilt in proportion to her knowledge of these events. Since she knew nothing about it, he saw no reason to feel any guilt. It made him feel better that there was part of his life she didn't know about.

"We should go, Nicholas. The reservation is for nine."

She grasped for his hand as they walked down the stairs. Maybe real love was just liking someone. A companion. A friend of sorts. The inspirational lovers were generally the ones who had their bags packed, waiting at the door. It was another irony of life. Always wanting what couldn't be had. Then achieving something only to discover that it has lost its appeal. Still Nicholas, despite his misgivings had a niggling belief in romantic love. It was the passion of the Mills & Boon novel that he had been sold on. It was notable always in its absence.

08/05/17 12:13

Sonia drove. They were going to her favourite restaurant. Nicholas generally didn't have strong opinions about such things. Food was a generic item in his book.

"Stephanie just got engaged to Bob last week" she volunteered.

"Really." Nicholas refused to be drawn.

The conversation was taking a predictable turn. There it was again. Being forced to make a decision. In a way he yearned for his twenties. Then everything had a veneer of newness. New relationship, new friends, new job. Everything seemed jaded beyond belief, now. There was nowhere new to go.

An immigrant always harbours the notion, in the back of his mind, that if things get bad enough he can just pull up roots and relocate. He's already done it once. Why not another time? Secretly however the thought appalled him. He wasn't ready for the task of redefining himself.

"Nicholas, when are we going to get engaged? Everyone I know is either engaged or getting married. What are we waiting for?"

"I just don't want to rush in to it. That's all." That was the best way to handle it. Stall for time.

"If we're going to do it. Let's do it right. I need to save some more money, you know."

"But Nicholas, that's what you said six months ago. I'm not getting any younger. Neither are you. I'm twenty seven years old. You're thirty."

"Don't say that?"

An ambulance passed them on Lakeshore, sirens blaring, flashing red.

"It's true Nicholas. You're going to have to grow up. Face the facts. You're not twenty-five anymore. You have to stop acting that way."

He had the sneaking suspicion she knew more about his infidelities that she had previously admitted.

"Stop procrastinating and make up your mind. I can't wait for you, forever."

They said no more about it, that evening. She had thrown down the gauntlet finally, as he knew she would. Events were closing in. When he analyzed his feelings (something he did quite often) it wasn't necessarily regard for her that was foremost in his mind. He had often imagined, perhaps naïvely that a decision like this, a pivotal point in his life would be one he would leap at gladly, swept away on the strength of his own feelings. When it came to the crunch, as it surely must soon, there was no heartfelt emotion. Maybe words like love should be stricken from the dictionary and replaced by a word like compromise.

At heart, Nicholas was an idealist. Life shouldn't be a vague, blind adherence to social trends. On average, the statistics show that men in their early thirties get married to women in the twenty-five to thirty age bracket. That was just the point. He didn't want to be a statistic. A life is too precious, his life was too precious, to be thrown away on averages and medians.

08/05/17 12:13

Sonia, like most women was a survivor. If Nicholas couldn't offer her what she wanted no doubt someone else would. There was the romanticism again. Wanting to be accepted without question. Not because you fulfilled certain criteria. Maybe it was too much to expect. He often wondered how readily he could offer it to someone else. He was, of course, an expert on his own needs and wants. None better.

So there it was a stark choice. He could sell out. Fit the bill. It just didn't seem right that the rat-race should enter the bedroom. Surely, some places were sacred, or ought to be. Maybe it was too much to believe that all these overwhelming wants, these raucous egos (his included) could find their match. Some other gross individualist to spend their lives with.

His head started to hurt again.

They parked the car and walked the few blocks to the restaurant. Once you got away from the lake the real Chicago quickly made its self known. One of Nicholas's first reactions to the city was the sheer ugliness of it. Chicago was a function city first and foremost.