

Years later I checked out a book about the history of China. Seven hundred and forty-one pages, 2.5 inches thick, written by Poverman and Levitsky. I could have gotten the e-version, but I sort of liked the weight in my backpack, like I was on some quest, like I was climbing a mountain. I took it to The Vault—it was now called The Lounge—and sipped Bud Light while reading it on my stool. "That's a big book," grinned the men at the bar. "Does it have any pictures?"

The book: it wasn't my favorite. It didn't really grab me. Opium wars, rebellions, people killing and getting killed. Now, years later, I can only tell you that they happened. Not when or where or who exactly was involved.

But there was a chapter toward the middle, about fighting in Rangoon. *A devastating loss*, it said, *to the people of Myanmar*. And I thought: No.

It's Burma, guys. Didn't they know?

I lugged the book to the grocery store. I pushed it in my cart, in the seat meant for children. Tubes of cookies tossed beside it. Cheese chunks, plastic-wrapped.

Burma. Two round sounds. Like the name of a woman.

"You sure know a lot about Burma," said my mother in the hospital. She whimpered and scratched the band at her wrist.

Burma, I said aloud down the shaking elevator at Livagon Insurance. I said it through the windshield wipers, blurring the red lights.

What do you know about pain? I'd asked Gabe Dove. And the thing I remember only now is that he didn't ask what I meant. About the punch, sure. But not about the thing I was asking him about.

"You'll see," he'd said. And he turned off the light to show me—to show both of us—the things that he knew.

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Let's Go to the Videotape

FROM *Harper's Magazine*

THE FINALISTS WERE HIM and some other people, but really there was just him. Him filming his boy, who was riding a bike for the first time. A red-and-blue Spider-Man one-speed with plastic webbing and Spidey graphics arrayed along the frame. The bike had been this year's Christmas surprise because Gus was five and not so much depressed as departed from faith that the universe doled out her favors equitably. He was, in this way, easy to impress but hard to parent, which often felt to Nick like trying to grow a happy boy in the soil of their misfortune.

Who doesn't film his kid experiencing a threshold moment? It was bittersweet, really. Of course it was. Gus pedaling away on his own, newly aware of his autonomy, which contravened everything Nick had taught him by force of grief, the bond between them fortified by the loss of Nick's wife—Gus's mom—three years ago in a car accident that was still being litigated today.

And so, the film. Possibly the winner of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, on which was: Gus wobbling along on his bike, insisting his father *not let go*, as Nick gripped an iPhone that actually corrected for the tremble in his hand as he *did* let go, despite the screaming woman who'd taken up residence in his heart the instant his wife died—her name was Dread—and Gus, whose fear turned to joy when he realized he wasn't falling, on the contrary he was flying. There was, also, a hint of the disconnect that afflicts people who are filming an event instead of participating in it, so that even as Gus's tire snagged on a rock and he vaulted over the handlebars; as his helmet, which was too big, came down over his eyes like

the curtain at show's end; as he popped out of the bush where he had landed and turned around several times because he could not see; as he cried out to his father, Nick beheld this spectacle at a distance, and continued to film.

Later, when they watched the clip at home, they agreed Gus had been pretty scared but also that it was pretty funny. He looked like one of those animals with its head trapped in a bag. Cue the circus music and probably Nick's friends would be amused.

They were. The next morning, six emailed back saying: *Hilarious. Also: That kid. And: I forwarded this to my sister who teaches kindergarten, and even she thought it was a riot.* By day's end, it had been posted online, subtitled humorously, and had more than five thousand views.

The studio was warm. Sweat dribbled down the host's neck, which someone kept blotting with a paper towel. He two-stepped across the room and worked his face into expressions of mirth. When he smiled, you could see his molars and caps. The audience sat on padded bleachers arranged as if someone had tossed them there. Ten grand, the host was saying, because that was the top prize for the night.

"Shoo-in," Nick whispered, and poked Gus in the ribs.

"Too tight," Gus said, and yanked at his chinos. The audience had been told to dress business casual, which had Nick stuffing Gus into last year's pants and polo, looking at the result and thinking: *big picture*. He would leave the superlative fashion sense to double-parent families and focus, instead, on celebrating his son with five million other Americans.

He pointed at the screen. The first finalist had a walrus rolled on its back like spilled pudding and an animal trainer nudging it in the gut with her foot. The voice-over said, "Yeah? Then *you* do ten sit-ups for a lousy piece of fish." The audience clapped. Second finalist: an older woman making popcorn who took a kernel in the eye. The voice-over said, "Glasses, Granny. The better to *seeeee* you with." The audience clapped. The man sitting next to Gus let out a hacking laugh, and said, "So true."

"We're up," Nick said.

Gus pulled at his collar. This morning he had asked Nick if the show was really a good idea because one of the kids at school had seen the video online and called him a tard, but Nick, who'd been bullied for stuff like poorly apportioned facial hair in high school,

knew that kids who wanted to harass his son would find a way, video or not.

"You're my special guy," he'd said. "And after tonight, everyone will know it." Which probably had not mollified Gus, but which had filled Nick with the kind of anticipation he hadn't felt since his second date with his wife. Before she'd been his wife, though already he could predict their future. Or some of it, anyway: They got married; they had Gus. And after, when Nick took stock of things, he found himself happy to a degree of hubris that attracts wrath the way an especially bright flower attracts a bee.

Subdural hematoma is what the doctors had said. Blunt-force trauma. Nick had been rear-ended by a car doing forty. His seat had lurched forward, then back, which slammed his head into his wife's, who'd been sitting behind him to coddle Gus because Gus got carsick. Weak seats, the industry had said. Regulated poorly. Under the speed limit, the other driver had said. It wasn't clear who had been to blame, but the blame was out there waiting for the law to assign it.

Not long after the accident, Gus had developed a speech impediment. A kind of nasal approach to language Nick barely even noticed anymore, but which the producers thought might ruin their film's big moment. So at 10.4 seconds in, when Gus rose up from the bush, pumping his arms like a newborn bird, and saying, almost yelling, "Daddy, am I okay?" the question was printed at the bottom of the screen in a cartoon font. The voice-over said, "Ahhh, the big questions."

Nick snickered and clapped Gus on the back. And when the audience laughed with more vigor than before, Nick said, "See?" and he beamed—less with pride than relief. Because the hardest part of being a single parent wasn't the logistics or even the exhaustion, but just the solitude of having no one to share his son's life with. The day after his wife died, Gus picked up a pink crayon and drew a circle for the first time. Nick had been so proud, though there was nothing *sui generis* about the circle or the precocious timing of its drawing. But who could he tell besides his wife? Who would care beyond his friends, whose care was dutiful at best? My boy just used a fork! Used the potty! Zipped his jacket! All these moments relished, extolled, and filed away in a vault of memories no one else would open. When Nick was feeling extra grim, he wondered if these memories were even safe with him as their only safeguard.

He was bad with names and faces and recently had a meeting with several lawyers, one of whom he mistook for opposing counsel because he hadn't remembered spending a half-hour with the man just two months earlier. So it was possible all the milestones Gus had jumped would actually be forgotten and in this way erased from the human script being written every second by every person on earth.

The show was almost over, time for the host to announce the results. Third place: "The Lazy Walrus." No surprise there. First place (Nick crossed his fingers in his lap, embarrassed that he should care so much): "The Existential Biker"! Sent in by Nick and Gus Slocombe from Providence, Rhode Island. Nick threw up his arms. Gus put his palms together, but if he'd meant to part them again, no one could say because the host was on them in seconds, shaking Gus's hand and saying congratulations. And, "How's the bike riding going?" Nick went a little pale. He hadn't known they'd be interviewed, and certainly not that the questions would be directed at Gus.

"I didn't catch that," the host said.

"Haven't tried," Gus mumbled.

"Well then!" the host said. "What are you going to do with the money?"

Nick shrugged. He hadn't really thought about the money. "Pay down some lawyer bills, I guess."

"Well then!" the host said. "How about this father-and-son team."

The morning after the show aired, Nick's inbox was full. He had 257 friends on Facebook and, overnight, 4,478 new friend requests. His timeline flowered with posts, half from women wondering where Gus's mom was in all this. After she died, Nick had shied away from joining any support groups because they contrived relationships among people whose only shared interest was grief. He knew some of his resistance issued from ego and pride but that some of it was rooted in real suspicion of the premise that a shared problem is a problem improved, no matter whom you're sharing it with. He'd have shared any problem with his wife, but that was because her bona fides had been tested and proven. After she was gone, he found himself unwilling to entrust his hurt to anyone but her. But now he was replying to these inquiries with the story of her death, and within a few minutes, he'd been added or in-

vited to multiple groups having to do with widowhood and single parenting and dating as a single parent and head trauma and, by extension, a group advocating better helmets for high school football players.

By the time Gus woke up, Nick had shucked many parts of his inner life and plated them with words he'd never spoken to his friends, let alone put out for public consumption, until it was no wonder his was a hugely appetizing page, not to mention his YouTube channel, where people had come to check out his other videos because "The Existential Biker" was no longer his to air.

Gus shuffled into the kitchen in his pajamas. "Why aren't you dressed?" Nick said. "Bus'll be here in twenty minutes."

"I'm itchy," Gus said, and lifted up his shirt.

"Cream's in the cabinet," Nick said. They'd been through this before. Anxiety rash is what that was. Best not to be indulged.

"But I don't want to go," Gus said. "Probably they all saw the show."

"I hope so!" Nick said. "You won ten grand. How many of your friends can say that? Is there anything you want me to buy you?"

Gus trudged off to the bathroom.

Nick was a real estate agent. He'd been on the job for years but rarely delegated the menial stuff to the newer guys. He always ran his own open houses. Did his own showings. These were what kept the job fresh. The influx of people and their stories, which were always about running to or running from. Divorce, marriage, death of a child, birth of a child. Today he was showing a five-bedroom colonial for \$1.8 million to a couple exiled from New York City who kept saying, "All this for one point eight?" He loved buyers from New York. They'd pay \$1.8 million for a shoebox *plus* shoe-horn and feel lucky for it.

Normally he liked to choreograph how his clients moved through a home—sequencing and narrative were the name of the game here—but today he was so distracted by his phone buzzing news of activity on his social media, he let them wander on their own.

"It works," he said, when asked about the fireplace. "Baseboard," he said, when asked about the heat. He thumbed the keypad on his phone, writing: *Me, too! Like I have any idea how to collage.*

The man tapped him on the shoulder. "I remember those days, he said with a yawn.

Nick put his phone away. "Do you have any more questions about the house?"

The man looked up at the crown molding squared around the room. "When it felt like nothing else existed in the world but you and her. All I can say is: enjoy it."

Nick shook his head, then smiled. Maybe the Internet really was his new girlfriend. "I was on TV last night," he said. "Me and my boy. *America's Funniest Home Videos*."

"Yeah? 'Unexpected foul-ups involving children?'" The man mimed air quotes.

Oh, right. Nick had almost forgotten. In addition to their skewed value judgments, his New York clients had also been so abraded by one another, they were never charitable, just mean. But Nick's spirits were robust. "We won," he said. "So lots of people are getting in touch." And he held up his phone.

"Enjoy it," the man said, though now his voice was less ominous than sincere.

Nick's phone buzzed again, but this time he didn't even try to be discreet. Just grinned and checked his messages and a voice-mail he hadn't noticed from his son's school saying he had to come pick up him right away.

Gus's lip was split down the middle. Swollen.

"Dad, what are you doing?" Nick positioned his phone and hit the record button. "Evidence," he said. "I'm gonna nail those little shits."

The way Gus had told it, he'd been surrounded by some of the older kids. "Am I okay?" they sneered, knocked him down, and said, "Guess not!"

"You're taking karate," Nick said. "And I'm buying you a BB gun. Two of them so you can leave one in your desk."

"It's okay," Gus said. "Probably I deserved it. Think I cut one of them in line or something."

"Almost done," Nick said, and zoomed out to capture a look on his boy's face that was pathos itself. Gus's lower lip pushed out beyond the upper in a pout he could not help. "I can call their parents," Nick said. "Of course. Now tell me again, what happened to you?"

"I fell," Gus said.

Nick stopped recording. "Don't you want me to help?" he said. But Gus began to cry. And Nick knew he wouldn't call anyone. That night, he put him to bed with the same bear Gus had slept with every night since his mom died. A proxy mom is what it was, with ears shorn of their fur because Gus chewed on them in his sleep. Did he need a therapist? Nick often wondered if he could mitigate his son's grief and hurt just by loving him or if his love would always be deficient for being compensatory.

Later, at the computer, he wrote: *Thanks. My kid's a looker, right? Because he'd uploaded the video of Gus's busted lip, which had garnered 457 likes in five minutes. Ten minutes after that, someone had reposted it with a title that read: Oh, life. Nick had been added or invited to multiple groups having to do with parents of kids who were routinely bullied. He joined them all.*

I wouldn't worry too much about that.

Sounds like you're doing an amazing job.

Gus is lucky to have you.

They all grow up despite us.

I totally agree.

Hang in there.

For the rest of the night, Nick gorged himself on the support offered up by Hajib Kumari and Stephanie Lustig, Joanna Schwartz and Jerry Stanwick. He was so touched all these people had taken the time to think about him and Gus, he stayed up late with his computer and woke up on the couch well after Gus had made his own breakfast and left for school.

Nick figured Gus must have been feeling sanguine about his prospects for the day, else he would not have left on his own. But he still felt badly and resolved to make it up to him at dinner. He was still mulling this over when the phone rang. It was his lawyer, which rarely boded well, except today was a different story. "They want to settle," he said, without hello.

This was the car company. A monolith that probably controlled 40 percent of the market, was being sued every day, and whose lawyers on retainer cost more than Nick would earn in his lifetime.

"Settle?" He said the word like he didn't know what it meant while picking up several Cheerios that were adrift on the couch. For a moment, he stopped hearing his lawyer as he realized with shame that Gus had taken his breakfast right next to him as he slept.

"Bad publicity," the lawyer said. "People are hashtagging about Gus and your story and it's gotten back to them. We should have done this years ago."

"How much?"

"You can quit your day job, if that's what you mean."

Nick agreed to the terms, then went online to share the good news. He got a few likes. Shawnie Davis posted a picture of the sun cresting over the horizon at dawn.

"How's my guy?" Nick said, and tousled Gus's hair. "Sorry about this morning, but you shoulda woken me up!"

"You were tired," Gus said. He put his backpack on the floor. It seemed heavier than a backpack should be for a five-year-old.

"Anything happen today?" Nick said. He'd already looked Gus over and surmised nothing had happened, which was what gave him the courage to ask.

"Mrs. Saffron said since everyone's been talking about our movie, we should all make our own."

"That's great. You got any ideas? Maybe like a dinosaur movie or something?"

"Can I use your phone to make it?"

Nick flipped through everything on his phone and decided it was fine. "Let me know if you need anything," he said as Gus went to his room.

When he hadn't come out an hour later, Nick put his ear to the door. "Take twelve," Gus said. So Nick backed away.

He microwaved them fish sticks for dinner but with a side of cheesy polenta he'd made thanks to a recipe posted by someone who thought maybe Nick needed some new ideas for how to nourish his kid. Gus said it was good, but he was obviously distracted and wanted only to return to his movie. Nick spent the evening online.

On Fridays, all the parents got a newsletter that recapped the week's highlights. This week had been all about multimedia and the kids' projects, so in the letter was a link to the school's YouTube channel where all the videos had been posted. Nick decided to make an event of it. Gus was still at school, and Nick was taking the day off. Maybe he'd take every day off from now on. He hadn't decided. He made some popcorn and cracked open a Dr Pepper.

"Let's go to the videotape!" he said and laughed. One of the kids had filmed his stuffed animals having a dance party. Another had filmed a tutorial about how to make a sandwich with one hand, since he was using the other to hold the phone. Gus's video was seventh, but after watching four of the others Nick just skipped ahead. At first the picture was black because Gus had his finger over the camera, but then suddenly there he was, front and center. He was sitting on his bed, filming himself.

"I'm Gus," he said. "I'm five."

Nick felt his chest expand. He was so proud of his son and knew what a big step this was for him given how self-conscious he was about his speech. You could barely even detect the problem. Gus enunciated. Focused. Looked right at the camera and seemed to project a confidence that was less put on than newly acquired. Nick smiled. Maybe he really was doing something right. He could not possibly love this boy any more than he did already.

"Okay, femme get my stuff," Gus said, and moved out of the frame. And then: "Vroom! Vroom!" as he sped two Matchbox cars across his bedspread, which was checkered in pictures of cars from multiple decades. Nick had often overheard Gus yapping about the cars and had thought it wonderful that his son showed an interest in something age-appropriate because such things were tell-tale of a boy whose psyche was generally untrammelled by the grief galloping through their lives.

"This was our car," Gus said, holding up a yellow 4x4. "You can't see it, but there's me, Mommy, and Daddy inside."

Nick sat up so quickly he upended the bowl of popcorn on his lap.

"And this is the other car." A VW Bug. Tiny in comparison. Harmless. Gus opened his arms, then crashed the cars into each other. Once and then many times, all without saying a word, which was somehow more ghastly than if he'd added sound effects. Then he got back in frame. "And that's how my mom died," he said.

Nick was shaking his head. His son had recorded a narrative he'd never shared with his father, and now the school had made it available to every parent at Grayson Elementary?

"I don't remember much except I wasn't feeling well so Mom had to sit in the back with me and now she's dead and I'm not."

Nick was on the phone to the school in seconds. He'd sue them too, if he had to. He felt like driving over there and strangling

whoever answered. But the principal was contrite and reassured him they'd take the video down immediately and with apology. He'd signed a release at the beginning of the year, she said, but also: she understood. "I'm a single parent, too," she added. He hung up. And then he refreshed the page every five seconds, during which intervals more and more people had commented on the video. Wasn't the school's site private? Who were these people? Gus needed counseling, they said. Gus was neglected. Gus was crying out for help.

Nick turned off the computer. But later, Ray Murtagh recommended a child psychiatrist renowned for treating orphaned children. And Caitlyn Donner posted links to studies about the positive effects of antidepressants on children. But then Heather Gonzales posted links to studies refuting other studies about the positive effects of antidepressants on children. Nick was grateful for the community and put off by the community, and wished with an aggression he had not felt in some time that his wife were here to relieve him of having to make all the decisions. How dare she have left him alone.

"What's up, bud?" Nick said. Gus was back from soccer and limping slightly.

"I fell," he said.

Nick eyed him skeptically.

"It's soccer," Gus said. Which was true.

"I made a Bolognese," Nick said. "Like Hamburger Helper, but with eggplant and portobello mushrooms."

He had intended to broach the subject of the film once they were at the table. "Romano or Parmesan?" he said.

Gus shrugged.

"What's wrong?" Nick said.

"They took my movie down."

Nick looked away, knowing instantly that he was going to lie about his part in this. "They did?" he said. "I saw it. It was great."

"They didn't think so," Gus said. He'd skewered a mushroom with his fork and was using it to carve a path through the pasta.

"I'm sure that's not it," Nick said. "It was a good video. It's how you feel. You're sad about Mom. I am, too. Though of course you know it's not your fault, right, bud? I mean, we've talked about

this a lot." Except they'd never talked about it, though Nick had always meant to.

Gus pulled out a flash drive from his pocket and spun it around. "They said it wasn't appropriate."

"Do you know what *appropriate* means?"

"Sorta."

By now, Nick had shrunk so low in his chair, it was a wonder he hadn't actually moved at all. He wanted to strangle the principal all over again, though what he really wanted was just to know what to do. When he'd been a kid, it was all G.I. Joe and ThunderCats. And here was Gus with a flash drive. Nick held it up to the light as if examining a gemstone. So many decisions and judgment calls to be made about how to pass his son through a world that had evolved beyond his capacity to understand it.

"You are more than appropriate," he said.

"Okay, Dad."

"No, no," Nick said. "I mean it. Come on," and he went to his computer, where he popped in the drive, turned up the volume, and enlarged the movie.

Gus's face took up the whole screen. He said: "I feel bad a lot of the time. I think about what if I didn't get sick. Or if we were going to the store instead of the zoo. If my mom is out there like people say. If she misses me."

Nick gripped the armrests of his chair. This was like looking into the well of Gus-related joys that had kept him afloat since his wife died but seeing now that those same joys had sunk his boy into self-recrimination and despair.

"See?" he said. "You're amazing." But now he was sinking, too. "I know," he said. "How about we post this to my page? Would that make you feel better?"

Gus put his forehead on the desk.

But Nick had already hit upload. And watched the friends roll in.