

Let's Go to the Videotape

5 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.

10 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.

15 And so, the film. Possibly the winner of *America's Funniest Home Videos*¹, 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.

20 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.

25 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.

30 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. [...]

"We're up," Nick said.

35 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 tard², 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.

40 "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.

¹ *America's Funniest Home Videos*: American TV programme in which viewers' videos are aired and judged; there is a cash prize for the funniest video

² short for *retard*

Subdural hematoma¹ 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*² 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. [...]

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. [...]

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. [...] 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 invited 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." [...]

"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.

¹ *subdural hematoma*: a collection of blood outside the brain, caused by severe head injury

² *sui generis*: unique

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.

90 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. [...] 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
95 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
100 acquired. Nick smiled. Maybe he really was doing something right. He could not possibly love this boy any more than he did already.

"Okay, lemme get my stuff," Gus said, and moved out of the frame. And then: "Vroom! Vroom!" as he sped two Matchbox cars¹ across his bedspread, which was checkered in pictures of cars from multiple
105 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 telltale 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.

110 "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
115 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
120 video down immediately and with apology. [...]

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

"I fell," he said. [...]

"What's wrong?" Nick said.

"They took my movie down."

125 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. [...]

"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."
130 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.

¹ Matchbox car: toy car

“They said it wasn’t appropriate.”

“Do you know what *appropriate* means?”

“Sorta.” [...]

135 “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.

140 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.

145 “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.

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