

# Strength

Nicholas Hamilton stood on the corner of Commercial St. and reflected upon his bad, bad day. Early on he had figured that this one would be at least a five-cupper, with a shot at six or seven. By two o'clock he had drained his fourth cup of Maxwell House, at which time he switched to Sanka for fear he would nibble the eraser off his mechanical pencil. Over the years Nicholas had acquired a peculiar habit of rating his days according to the amount of coffee he consumed. Even his coffee drinking was a peculiar habit, growing not from taste or preference, but from an odd perception that it came with the territory. Historically, anything over a three-cupper was a frustrating day; the worst day he recalled weighed in at six cups. So as Nicholas stood on the corner, having just emerged from his office into the cold night air, he was struck by an upsetting mixture of nausea and worry over the thirteen cups of coffee he had swallowed this day.

He was about to cross the street when the light flashed "DON'T WALK." Instinctively, he stopped. To kill time, he glanced up at the clock on the First Bank and Trust Co. It showed first 11:30 and then thirty-two degrees. *Oh, brother*, he groaned to himself. He looked again at the crossing light and tapped his foot impatiently on the curb stone. For no apparent reason he started to giggle. He pursed his lips and forced a straight face, but the harder he tried the funnier it got. In a few seconds he was overcome by laughter at the thought of waiting for a traffic light on a deserted street. He tried to cross the street, but he had started to laugh so hard that his knees buckled, forcing him finally to kneel against a light post with his face buried in his arms to muffle his laughter. To a passer by he would have appeared pious and grief stricken; the fact was that, once his fuse had been lit (and it had not been for quite some time), he usually got to laughing so hard that there would be nothing left of him but tear-streaked ruins.

He leaned against the post for a while to catch his breath. His diaphragm ached and he couldn't see a thing through the tears. In a few minutes the giggles subsided and Nicholas felt the strength flow back into his legs. He wiped off his face and looked around casually to verify that there had been no witnesses to this crazy scene. He did this, of course, without the slightest idea of what he might have done had there actually been a

witness. Nevertheless, he felt, people would think he was a wino if he didn't spend at least a moment demonstrating that he had regained his composure. Another chuckle escaped. Relieved that he had not been observed, Nicolas brushed off his knees and crossed the street.

He walked the next block still a bit unsettled from the episode on the corner, wondering what could have possessed him to explode like that. *It must have been all that caffeine*, he thought. He remembered how George had warned him all day to switch to orange juice.

"That coffee'll be the death of ya, Nick. Just the death of ya. Here, drink some O.J. Has loads of vitamin C and potassium."

"I eat banana splits for potassium," Nick had replied without looking up from his work.

"Christ, you gotta take care of yourself, Nick. You're gonna end up a fat, nervous wreck," had been George's final assessment.

"And you're already a skinny, pedantic twit," had been Nick's, though he did not bother to air it.

A gusty wind whirled the November leaves about Nick's feet as he turned onto a poorly lit street. He walked through this darkened section of the city with his head hung low. Most nights he quickened his step as he passed through this neighborhood, but tonight he slowed down to a stroll, focusing his energies on thought rather than action. He was in no hurry to arrive home; it felt good just to walk away from work. He heard arguing voices in the low-slung housing projects that lined the street. *Those people should laugh more*, he thought. *So should you*, he heard a voice say inside his own head. Nick's hands were deep in the pockets of his overcoat and his shoulders were hunched up, as if to shield himself from the cold. But he no longer felt the cold; he was numbed from exhaustion and felt only an odd tension that showed itself in his posture. It was as though some very important idea was about to occur to him, if he would only walk on long enough to let it.

He continued to think about the events of the day. Actually, there had been only one event: he had tried, without success, to write a chapter on the "applicability" and "extensibility" of the company's newest piece of miracle computer software.

“Home computer users all over the country are ripping down Radio Shacks to get their hands on this software,” George had said, “and you’re going to write the manual that tells them how to unlock all of its power and elegance!” George often waxed poetic on things non-human.

It was now Thursday, over a week after the assignment had been given, and Nick had the third chapter to complete, subject to George’s approval, in only eight hours. Fifteen hours and as many pages later, the chapter was only partially finished, not yet approved, and Nick was out the door having hysteria over traffic lights.

Nick felt irritated. For five years he had completed every assignment on time. It was not that having difficulty surprised him. On the contrary. It had never been easy. He remembered Joanna’s sad expression when he told her that he had decided to take this job. That was during the early spring of their last year in college. *Why did she come to mind after so many years?* he wondered. He had last heard from her two years ago. She had sent a postcard from somewhere in Switzerland describing the lakes and mountainsides, and how she wished he could see it so he could write her a story about it. She was always coaxing him to write stories, he recalled. He crossed a plaza and headed uptown while his mind wandered back to his last two years of college.

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Nicholas stroked gracefully and powerfully down the ice. Each time he circled the rink he would gain speed, imagining that he cut a dashing figure. Later, when the surface became rutted around the rink’s perimeter, he would retreat to the inner part of the oval, that area not clearly defined but whose boundaries were well understood, where the better skaters traced their figure eights and perfected their form. Joanna was often there, but he had never seen her. Nicholas saw few people during his skating hours. For him, the rink was not for socializing but for working. He clung to the dream of skating well and concentrated only on that while at the rink. At this time, his third year of school, Nicholas knew he could not become a competitive skater: he did not want to. He sought not the approval of others for being a good skater, but the exhilarating, private feeling of whooshing across the ice, of moving with the music and being moved by the music, of

expressing his happiness and anger and frustration through arcing leaps and dazzling spins. It was the power and the speed, the emotional intensity of skating that Nicholas responded to with such single-minded devotion. His devotion was his secret, however. Like the Sunday jogger who hopes some day to run a marathon, Nick showed the effort and the discipline, but was embarrassed to reveal any of the passion.

Nick slowed his pace and coasted around with his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight rhythmically to the song coming over the local rock station. This was his rest lap, but his mind was still trained on skating, thinking of ways to improve his form or sharpen his technique. Joanna made her move when he rounded the bend.

"Hi, you skate well," she began. "I've been noticing you here since the rink opened. You really have improved a lot in such a short time."

Nick blushed a little. "Oh, thanks," he returned with a nervous chuckle. He felt he should say he had noticed her, too, and compliment her skating, but he knew he had never seen this woman before. Still, he wanted to continue, so he asked her if she was a student.

"Uh-huh," she replied. "I'm majoring in English Lit., hoping to be a novelist some day. How 'bout you?"

"Hey, I'm a Lit. major, too," Nick said a bit too enthusiastically, pleased to have found something in common with her. "But I think I'd be better off with, say, technical communications or something like that," he continued. "As much as I like writing, I don't think it's going to land me any great jobs," he concluded.

Nick didn't notice Joanna's frown. He did notice that she remained silent for a while, but he had come to accept awkward pauses as a standard part of first conversations. What Nicholas didn't know was that Joanna was not given to awkward pauses. She had a creative mind and a sharp wit, both of which contributed to her being an excellent conversationalist. If she paused, it was to choose her next words carefully. She did this and spoke them flatly. "No, I don't imagine you will get any great jobs."

Nicholas watched her skate off and had only one thought: *Touché*.

He continued to work hard at the rink. He began to notice when Joanna was there and when she wasn't. During his rest laps he would sometimes think about what she had said to him when they first met, and he always concluded that she was a gutsy woman. It

took guts to spend a boat load of money on an education, only to end up in as unstable a profession as writing, he thought. That she hoped to be a novelist both impressed and scared him. What if her pen went dry? Didn't it worry her? He couldn't help but think it would be so much more sensible to establish herself with some kind of steady writing job before writing books. He wondered how she had come to decide such important questions in her life. *Some day I'll find out*, he told himself.

Over the next several months Nick approached Joanna more and more. They often talked about skating or some other casual topic. The writing profession was not brought up, however. Nick almost asked Joanna several times about her motivations — why she was in school, why she skated, why she wanted to write. But he didn't for fear of asking questions whose answers she was not ready to reveal to him. Though he would not admit it to himself, he was also afraid of the answers she might give him.

Nick spent a lot more time with Joanna once he began to feel safe with her. It was not that he thought her malicious, but rather that he sensed a seasoned, comfortable security about her that he thought might overpower his own insecure nature. Of course, Nick did not recognize it in these terms. His own insecurity had only begun to appear to him since meeting Joanna; and as he grew slowly to understand his fears and worries, he realized that Joanna has seen them in him from their first conversation. He thought her amazingly perceptive. He was amazingly blind.

Nick and Joanna developed a close friendship during the following year. They skated together frequently, and Joanna succeeded in getting Nick to play at skating rather than always work at it. Their favorite game was "add a trick" — each had to do all the tricks just done by the other, and then add one. Nick had more stamina than Joanna and could execute even a dozen complicated jumps in a row, but she would invariably win by adding a trick that Nick couldn't do. She usually won it with the double axel jump, a forward take-off, two-and-a-half terrifying revolutions in the air, and a backward landing, all executed with style and power. Once she pulled out the double axel, Nick would give in. Joanna could count on it. It wasn't Nick's nature to attempt something he wasn't sure of. When they first started playing there were many tricks Joanna could win with, and she usually did. Then Nick would study them, practice them, practice them some more, until he felt sure he could match Joanna. The double axel, though, had always eluded him. No

matter how hard you tried you could never be sure of landing it. The best in the world fell on it all the time. Joanna called the double axel a leap of faith. It was a leap Nicholas was not prepared to make.

During one game Nick had worked Joanna up to six tricks. She knew she had a few more in her, but Nick could easily do another half dozen, so she forced his hand and did an explosive double axel as her seventh trick.

“No fair!” Nick yelled.

“Whadda you mean, ‘No fair!’” she yelled back, imitating his voice. “You can do a double. Just do a single and try a little harder,” she said.

He looked at her.

She stared at him.

“I don’t think I’m ready to do one yet,” he said, fearing the possible failure far more than the associated fall.

Joanna skated at him furiously and executed a perfect hockey stop, spraying him with ice shavings from the blades up. “You think to damned much!” she hollered. “I don’t want you to concede, I want you to try! Now jump!”

Nick thought for a moment she was really angry. Then he became certain of it. “All right, I’ll try,” he said weakly. He did not feel inspired or spurred on, just irritated. He skated down the ice and did the first trick. The next five were all easy. Now came the double axel. He didn’t step right into but took an extra lap for preparation. *I shouldn’t do this*, he thought, as he stepped onto his take-off leg and started the jump. He managed two revolutions and then touched down too soon, unprepared to land facing forward. Unavoidably he fell, continuing his rotation so he would land on his backside. He slid a few feet and stopped. It looked like he should have hurt himself, but Joanna knew it had been a painless fall. It was the way everyone fell who didn’t really go for the jump, she thought. She glided over to him and looked down. “I didn’t want you to give up,” she said and skated away.

They left the rink together. Nick broke the silence. “What were you trying to prove in there? I thought the game was supposed to be for fun.”

“The game isn’t fun if you give up every time,” she replied a little sadly.

They walked to a courtyard and sat on a bench, not looking at each other.

“So I give up. You expect me to kill myself for a lousy double?” Nick questioned.

“Oh, forget it. It’s not important. You know, if you had just pulled in a little longer you’d have had a nice double.”

“Some day,” Nick said.

Joanna changed the subject. “Written any stories lately?”

“Stories? I can’t write stories,” Nick said with a tentativeness that Joanna mistook for false modesty.

“Oh, come on now, just because your stories aren’t Pulitzer prize winners, that doesn’t mean you should deny your talent. Don’t you remember reading one to me? It was very moving, Nick.”

“Joanna, people would laugh at that sentimental gushing. Half the guys I know look at me cross-eyed because I figure skate. Imagine if they thought I was some kind of *artiste*. He gave an affected French inflection to his last word.

Joanna persevered. “What guys? What are you raving about, Nick? I thought you liked writing. It comes so easily to you.”

Nick paused. It was his turn to choose his words carefully. “A person can like a lot of things, Joanna, but that doesn’t mean they’re going to get him anywhere. Love of something is wonderful, but it doesn’t get you jobs and it doesn’t make you good at it — it has no tangible value!” He looked at her hard, pleading with his eyes that she would understand. She did. She smiled at him in a way she never had before.

“Nick, the only person in life you have to please is you,” she said warmly.

He returned her smile, pleased that she had seen his point of view. He had not understood what she had really tried to tell him.

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Nick woke from his daydream a few blocks from home. He glanced at his frowning reflection in a darkened window and removed his tightly clenched fists from his pockets, wiping his sweaty palms on his coat. *George is going to kill me*, he thought. *Unless I get to him first. Maybe I’ll drown him in a vat of orange juice.* Nick laughed at the thought of such a fitting demise. Across the street someone paused and eyed him warily. He

considered waving, but thought better of it. His sudden lightheartedness surprised him. It occurred to him that he had been rather humorless for quite some time. He remembered Joanna telling him once that he should ease up. But hadn't she been talking about skating? *No*, Nick thought. *She hadn't, and you know it*, he told himself.

He began to examine his own conflicts as he had never done before. In school he had simply refused to acknowledge what he wanted to do. He sought to excuse his skating and his writing, afraid that if he indulged in them he would appear unproductive, impractical. Nicholas had always known that creativity and expressiveness were instinctive to him. Joanna had tried again and again to tear down the emotional dam he had built around those instincts in the name of "getting a job" and "making a living." Why had he resisted? A matter of strength, perhaps. He had never had true strength, the kind of confidence that holds itself up. He had always clung to something else to stay afloat but had never swum. Joanna was a swimmer, and he admired her for it from the moment he met her. How he had tried to do what she had done, to write and be happy with it, regardless of the outcome. But he had been too unsure — too obsessed with a need to *be* sure — to break out of his mold.

*So I've been writing trash for five years, making my living*, he said to himself. It amused him that intelligent people often had the hardest time distinguishing living and making a living. He reached his brownstone and leaned against the bannister. *So I've reached my boiling point, have I? One page of expository prose too many and I start guzzling coffee and laughing at traffic lights*. He stood silent for a while and contemplated quitting his job. In time, he thought. *I can't last much longer with George, anyway*.

He gazed across the street at the park. The moonlight played curiously off the surface of the little pond. *How can it be so still with all this wind?* he thought? All at once it came to him, the idea he had been waiting for all night. He let out an elated yelp and rushed upstairs to get his skates.