

The Man Who Saved the World

The stage is dark, and as the lights slowly, painfully, rise on a bed, on which lays a twenty- or thirty-ish male, we hear the sounds of cheers and adulation. Over the cheers, we hear...

MALE ANNOUNCER

There it is! We can see it now! The space shuttle with Nick Mattingly is making its final approach turn for the runway. The crowd here at Edwards Air Force Base is going wild as Commander Mattingly prepares to land to a grateful planet...

More cheers rise and fall, and we hear another announcer...

FEMALE ANNOUNCER

The crowds lining Broadway are overflowing to the side streets all along the parade route, as people try to catch a glimpse of Commander Nicolas John Mattingly, whose bravery and skill are being lauded today in a celebration that rivals any ever seen here in New York...

One last swell of cheers as the lights have risen to full. There is a knock on a door. The man does not stir.

MOTHER - *(From behind the door)* Nicholas? Nick, dear. Are you awake, honey?

FATHER - *(Also behind the door, demanding)* Nick, this is your father. Open the door, son.

The young man under the covers regretfully stirs. As he throws back the covers and lumbers to the door, it is clear that every moment is performed in emotional agony. Unshaven, disheveled and unkempt, he leans heavily against the door.

NICK

Ma?

MOTHER

Yes, dear.

NICK

Dad?

FATHER

Son.

NICK

What was the name of my fourth grade teacher?

MOTHER

Nick, dear, do we really have to –

NICK

(Angry, insistent) What was the name of my God-damned fourth grade teacher?

FATHER

(To Nick, through the closed door) Don't you talk to your mother like that –

MOTHER

(Insistent, to Charlie, from the other side of the door) Charlie.

FATHER

(To Loretta) We're his parents, Loretta. We don't deserve this disrespect, God-damn it.

MOTHER

(Through the door to Nick) It was Miss Saundinger when the year began, but around halfway through the semester she got married and became Mrs. Krause.

(There is a pause)

NICK

What was my favorite toy?

FATHER

(Really pissed) God-damn, it boy –

MOTHER

It was a model of the lunar lander. You built it yourself when you were eight years old. We still have it, too, on your old dresser. You were always so interested in the space program –

Nick unlocks the door and peers around it. The father pushes open the door, almost knocking Nick down

FATHER

Jesus Christ, boy, what's gotten into you? I need to go through God-damn Checkpoint Charlie to see my own son?

NICK

(As he lumbers back to the bed and lays down) I just needed to be sure.

MOTHER

(Enters and crosses to the bed as the Father begins to walk around, inspecting the room, which is a shambles) Goodness me, just look at this place.

NICK

(Bolts up in bed. Panic stricken) Shut the door! Shut the door!

FATHER

Don't yell at your mother!

NICK

Shut the God-damned door!

MOTHER

(Crosses quickly back to the door and shuts it) All right, I'm sorry. I'm shutting it. It's shut.

NICK

Lock it. Did you lock it?

MOTHER

(Locking it) Yes, it's locked. See? *(Nick sinks back into the bed and she crosses back to him. She speaks carefully)* We hadn't heard from you in three weeks, Nicolas. We were starting to get worried. *(Another pause)* It wasn't easy getting this address. *(More silence)* That nice Colonel Greenport told us you were here.

FATHER

Helluva place for a hero to be.

NICK

(Bolts upright) Just stop that. Stop that right now.

FATHER

Now look, boy, all I said was -

NICK

I heard what you said. Now just stop it.

There is a gloomy silence as the Mother and Father look helplessly at each other.

MOTHER

(Hopefully) Your sister Laura sends her regards.

NICK

(Sarcastically) Really. And how is the next Meryl Streep?

FATHER

(Proudly) Just signed a three picture deal with Paramount for 30 million dollars. Julia Roberts got only 5 million for her last film, you know.

MOTHER

Regis is going to have her co-host next week -

NICK

(Buried under the covers, he mumbles incoherently) Not bad for a woman who two months ago couldn't get into a community theater show.

FATHER

What was that? We couldn't hear you.

NICK

(Sits up long enough to spew) I said not bad for a woman who two months ago couldn't even get into the chorus of her community theater.

MOTHER

I guess this means you don't want to hear about Robert's talk show.

NICK

(Bolts back up) My brother Robert?

MOTHER

Oprah had him on last week, you know, to talk about you and your life together, and right there - on the air - she said he was a natural for it.

FATHER

Next thing you know they're offering him a syndication deal.

MOTHER

Oprah herself is going to produce it. Can you believe it?

Nick just falls back into bed, disgusted. From his prone position, he speaks hopefully.

NICK

Has anyone heard from Carol?

Mother and father look helplessly at each other.

FATHER

No, son. We haven't.

MOTHER

I saw her mother downtown last week.

NICK

(Sits up. First sign of enthusiasm for something) Really? Has she spoken to Carol? Does she know where she is? Did she mention my name? Where is she? Why hasn't she called?

MOTHER

I... never got the chance to talk to her. *(Embarrassed)* She saw me and turned the other way.

FATHER

That woman was always rude.

MOTHER

That's not true Charlie, and you know it. That woman was my best friend until – *(Stops suddenly. Looks apologetically at Nick)* Look, Nick, it's a strange time for everyone.

NICK

With all due respect, mother, I think I know that better than anyone else.

MOTHER

(Sits down on the edge of his bed) A month ago everyone on the planet thought they were going to die. Everyone. And then, like a miracle, you show up in your shuttle and deflect that asteroid away from us.

NICK

(Disgusted) That was no miracle, mom. It was good old-fashioned science.

MOTHER

You're not giving yourself enough credit, dear.

NICK

And you're giving me too much. Everyone is. I was just the guy in the ship. Does anyone think I could have pulled it off if a thousand people in mission control weren't telling me what to do? They had just as much to do with this *(disdains the word)* miracle as I did. But thanks to NASA's PR machine there probably isn't a person on this planet who doesn't know who I am or what I look like. Or think I'm some kind of God-damned superman.

FATHER

I heard somebody on the TV say you were more recognizable than the president or the Pope. More popular, too.

NICK

(Picks up and leafs through a stack of paper from the night stand) Greenport dropped these off yesterday. Look at them. A call from the Democrats in Kentucky asking me if I want to run for senator. A call from the Republicans in Colorado asking me to run for governor. And here's one from the Vatican. No message. They just said to call. Look at this. Hundreds, thousands of messages from total strangers. Job offers. Endorsement deals. Marriage proposals. *(Throws the papers into the air)*

MOTHER

People are grateful, surely you can understand that.

NICK

Gratitude I can understand. But it got so I couldn't take two steps down the street without being mobbed. I'd step out of my apartment and there'd be fifty cameras in my face. I couldn't go to the bathroom without someone asking for my autograph. I tried going out to dinner one night and someone just pulled up a chair to my table and sat down and started talking to me. And the questions they ask. "So Nick, which stocks should I buy" or "tell me, Nick, which job should I take" or "Nick, should I divorce my wife?" How the hell should I know? Total strangers think I have some divine insight into their lives.

FATHER

(Wryly) Maybe that's what the Vatican wants to talk to you about.

MOTHER

Charlie, don't be blasphemous.

FATHER

Oh, let me have a little fun with the boy.

NICK

It's not so funny, dad. There are some real nuts out there. Last week CNN had on the leader of some new sect in Wyoming that thinks I'm Jesus.

FATHER

(Having some fun now) Really? I didn't know you were Jewish.

MOTHER

(Very upset) Charlie. Stop this right now. Nicolas, dear, hiding out in this Godforsaken place because you need to get away from all the excitement is one thing, but comparing yourself to our Lord Jesus is quite another.

NICK

(Defensive) I didn't say anything of the sort. I was only repeating what others are saying. *(Reaches for her hand. Softer)* Don't worry, mom, it won't go to my head. It can't. Just last night someone else was on Fox saying I was the devil because I didn't let the damn thing hit us and do God's will. *(Darkly)* Maybe I should have.

MOTHER

Nicolas!

FATHER

Son!

MOTHER

What a horrible thing to say.

NICK

Look at me, I can't go out on the street like a normal person anymore. The woman I love won't talk to me. And yesterday I got this. *(Holds out a piece of paper)*

FATHER

What is it?

NICK

It's from NASA. They're pulling me from flight rotation.

FATHER

What! That's outrageous. We'll call Greenport and –

NICK

Forget it. I tried. NASA said the order comes straight from the White House. They say the world would never forgive the United States if it lost Nick Mattingly – the man who saved the world. Can you believe this? The one thing I've wanted to do all my life is fly, and the president says I can't even take up a Cessna. *(Sits dejectedly on his bed, again. Then, hopefully)* Are you sure Carol hasn't let any messages? Maybe sent a letter? An email?

Mother sadly shakes her head, Nick falls back into his bed.

MOTHER

Honey, Carol is just overwhelmed by everything that's been happening, that's all. She still loves you and she'll come back.

NICK

No she won't. She won't because she doesn't love me.

MOTHER

Of course she does.

NICK

She doesn't. She can't. How can she love someone she's scared of?

MOTHER

Oh, now, honey, Carol's not scared of you. Who told you that?

NICK

Nobody had to tell me. I could see it in her eyes the last time we were together. I... I didn't realize it then but I've seen the look on other faces since then. It's the look of realization of what might have been. An asteroid smashing into the earth, making a crater the size of Texas. A cloud of dust that covers the entire planet. The billions who survived the impact facing a slow death from thirst, starvation or suffocation. That's what they see – that's what Carol saw – when she looked at me, mom. Not Nicolas Mattingly, the man she loved. She saw her own death. I am... and will always be... a living reminder... of death.

MOTHER

That's not true, Nick, you're a reminder of life. You saved 6 billion lives –

NICK

(Loses it) Stop it stop it stop it. Stop saying that. I am not God, I'm not Jesus. I am not responsible for every single one of those six billion people living or dying.

MOTHER

You put your own life on the line for a whole planet.

NICK

Then how come I can't get one person out of those six billion to speak to me?
(With a self-deprecating laugh) Some God I am.

MOTHER

Baby, it will get better, I promise you it will.

NICK

(Gratefully) At least I still have my mommy to tell it's going to be all right. *(To Father)* And my father to tell me to get back on the horse.

MOTHER

You know we'll always be here for you, Nick.

NICK

I know. I know. *(Pause)* That's why I'm going to trust you with a secret.
(Beckons them closer) I'm going back up.

MOTHER

But how? Why? I thought NASA wouldn't –

NICK

The Russians are going to take me up. To the Space Station. They consider it a great honor. Besides, they love tweaking NASA's nose. Remember that businessman who paid them to take him into space? NASA hated that.

MOTHER

But why? Why would you want to go back up there? Put your life in danger –

NICK

Mom, all I ever wanted to do my whole life was go “up there.”

FATHER

(Proudly) Got your pilot’s license before you could drive a car.

NICK

Being “up there” has always been more important to me than anything else. It’s all I ever wanted. That’s why I have to go back up. Space is the only place where I can find peace.

MOTHER

But Nick, to go back up there again. Why? Because you think it will make Carol come back?

NICK

No, mom. I know that nothing is going to make her come back.

MOTHER

(Holding back tears) Then I don’t understand. What purpose does it serve? You’re going to have to come down, eventually.

NICK

Maybe. Maybe not.

MOTHER

(To her husband, terror in her voice) Charlie...

FATHER

(He knows) Nick, are you sure this is what you want?

NICK

Yea.

FATHER

When are you leaving?

NICK

Two days. The Russians are going to pick me up in a private jet at the airfield down the road.

FATHER

Do you need anything from home?

NICK

Yea. Could you send me my lunar lander model?

Mother starts to cry.

FATHER

Sure. Anything else?

NICK

No. You guys going to be all right?

FATHER

(Putting his arm around Mother) Yea. We'll be okay. *(Pause)* We have a daughter who's a movie star, one son who's a talk show host, and another who saved the world.

Mother, Father, and Nick cross to each other and hug as the lights slowly fade

End play