

The Summer of Saint Nick

by Sean Hartofilis

Nikitas Skopelitis looked up at the clouds and couldn't believe that they felt like anything but cotton balls. Except in school they said they were made out of water. But he still didn't understand how they stayed up in the air when everything else fell.

He looked up while seven other seven-year-olds looked down, grabbing their toes and stretching their legs alongside him on the red, rubber track at Bethpage High School. Then, suddenly, the seven other seven-year-olds stopped stretching and started running. But Nikitas didn't see them. He just stood and stared, straight up, until he heard a yell—a yell yelling “Run!”—because Nikitas was at track practice.

I don't understand why you have to *practice* running, Nikitas thought as he darted off in the direction of the seven other seven-year-olds, when it's exactly the same every time.

Nikitas had never been to track practice before. He'd been to a lot of other practices—soccer and football and basketball and baseball and lacrosse—but never track. For some reason, his mother had signed him up for track just the other day, probably because he always said he liked running, or because baseball season was over and she needed to get him out of the house for a few hours. Either way, after today, he wouldn't ever be back at track practice again.

He wouldn't be there because when the seven other seven-year-olds stopped, Nikitas kept going—he didn't see them stop, just as he hadn't seen them start. And he didn't see them because he was running with his eyes, again, towards the clouds—not because he liked looking at the clouds, even though he did very much, but because he was absolutely convinced that he ran faster when his head hung back and bounced between his shoulder blades (something about aerodynamics).

So he kept running until, about a quarter of the way around the track—about twice as far as when the rest of the kids had stopped—someone pushed him. Then someone else pushed him.

Two boys (probably brothers, Nikitas guessed a few hours later) pushed him down and started beating him up. Nikitas's knees dug into the track and tiny rubber pellets, like red Jujubes, tore through his skin and stayed there. The boys kicked him and pulled his hair and, as he cried, Nikitas wondered why.

Nikitas lifted his hands to protect himself, covering his face as he looked between his fingers to make out the faces of the two boys—to see what it was in their faces that made them want to hurt him. But he didn't see anything. Then a woman (probably the boys' mother, Nikitas guessed a few hours later) came and pulled the two boys' hair and pulled them away by it, screaming words that Nikitas wasn't allowed to say while she did, and the two boys started crying.

Nikitas watched the cursing woman drag the boys through the grass surrounding the track, receding into the distance with their fingers clawing the dirt like the screaming victims in so many scary movies that Nikitas had watched when he was supposed to be sleeping. And Nikitas just lied there, crying and bleeding, on the red, rubber track, by himself, while the rest of the seven-year-olds stood around their coach and listened a quarter of a mile back (he'd probably missed the finish line, Nikitas guessed many years later). Anyway, that's why he never went to track practice again.

Nikitas's mother waited in the parking lot of Bethpage High School in her maroon minivan as her son approached. Two autistic men were in the minivan with her: Bruce, a big man with a square jaw and helmet of salt-and-pepper hair, sat in the back, while Joey, a smaller man with a mustache and thin, spiky brown hair, rode shotgun. Joey toyed incessantly with the bass and treble settings on the radio as Bruce looked around the car and outside of the car, reading everything in sight, to himself but aloud, over and over again.

"Leave it, Joey. It's fine. It all sounds the same," Nikitas's mother told Joey as she put her right hand over his left and moved it from the radio to his lap.

"Not if you know what you're doing," Joey responded, returning his hand to the knobs.

"Sounds the same. Sounds the same," Bruce said.

The rear door slid open. Nikitas entered and sat alongside Bruce.

“See, Bruce agrees,” Nikitas’s mother said, returning her hand to his. “Now let it alone before we can’t hear anything.”

Joey quickly shoved both of his hands into his pockets. “Only because I just fixed it,” he said. “Now it works perfect.”

Nikitas’s mother turned to her son in the back seat. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” she said. “What happened to your face?”

Nikitas’s eyes were red and his cheek was scratched—but not as badly as his knees, which he covered with his hands. “It got cut,” Nikitas answered. “Hi, Bruce. Hi, Joe.”

“Hi. Hi,” Bruce said.

“How, Nick?” Nikitas’s mother asked as she turned in her seat, grabbing his face with equal love and concern—amounting to plenty of force.

“I think I was running too fast,” Nikitas told her, still (and forever) unsure of exactly what had happened.

“My poor wee one,” Nikitas’s mother said, looking into his red, wet eyes. Then, quickly turning back in her seat, she added, “Well, you have to be careful,” and started the car.

Nikitas listened to Bruce read street signs and stop signs and house numbers as they drove through the Bethpage suburbs. Whatever he saw, he’d just keep repeating it until he saw something else. Nikitas wondered what would happen if they drove west, into the desert, like in the Cowboy movies he watched with his father (his father said there were still deserts like that and that maybe they’d go someday). Would Bruce keep saying the last sign he’d read for the rest of his life? And what would that last sign say?

Bruce looks a little bit like one of the cowboys from those movies, Nikitas thought, with his square chin and shifty eyes.

“Mom?” Nikitas asked from the backseat.

“Son?” she asked back.

“Can we get Burger King?” Nikitas asked, looking at his mother in the rearview mirror through his big brown, but still red, eyes.

“Nick,” she said with a sigh, “I just picked up a London Broil from King Kullen.”

Nikitas dropped his head, showing his mother his crown of shiny black hair, and said, “Fine.”

“Burger King,” Bruce said. “Double Whopper. Chicken Fries. Burger King!”

Nikitas’s mother looked at Bruce, then back at Nikitas, his head still hanging low, bouncing up and down with each impurity in the road. “Well,” she said, “it looks like we don’t have much of a choice.”

Nikitas and his mother sat in Burger King, his mother eating a cheeseburger and Nikitas eating chicken tenders, while Joey and Bruce stood at the counter, Joey creating some elaborate concoction at the soda fountain and Bruce filling endless cups of ketchup.

“Mom?” Nikitas asked from across the thick, square Formica-topped table.

“Son?” she asked back.

“Does it ever make you feel bad?” he asked her.

“Does *what* ever make me feel bad?” she asked back.

“Bruce and Joe,” Nick answered, “...what happened to them.”

“Nothing happened to them,” his mother said. “They were born that way.”

“Oh,” Nikitas said, “yeah.”

Nikitas’s mother watched her son’s head fall as he pawed a chicken tender into his mouth and chewed, staring down into his lap. “I couldn’t help them if I felt bad all the time, Nick,” she told him. “I wouldn’t be any fun to be around.” She smiled.

Nikitas smiled back. “Right,” he said. He lifted his soda and took a sip. “I won’t let it make me feel bad anymore.” He refocused on his meal.

His mother watched him for a long moment. “It’s okay, you know, if it makes you feel bad,” she said. “That means you’re sensitive. That’s good.”

Nikitas looked up from his half-finished box of chicken. “It is?” he asked.

“Sure, it is,” his mother told him. “Girls like it.”

Nikitas sipped his soda and thought for a second. “*You’re* a girl,” he said to his mother.

“I am,” she agreed, and Nikitas smiled.

Bruce and Joey sat down with their condiment-covered trays—they look like collages, Nikitas thought, from art class. Joey took a slurp of his brew.

“What kind of drink did you make, Joe?” Nikitas asked him.

“Diet Mr. Cherry Coca Seven Up...” Joey said before letting out a big burp.

Bruce considered this for a moment as Nikitas looked at him, waiting for him to repeat the name of this groundbreaking soft drink. But then Bruce thought better and just took a huge bite of his burger.

“Cool,” Nikitas said to Joey.

“*Mist*,” Joey added.

“Wow,” Nikitas said.

“Wow,” Bruce repeated.

Joey pulled the drink closer, slurping suspiciously.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Nikitas told his mother.

“Wash your hands,” she said.

Nikitas approached the toilet, unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, and pulled them down all the way to his sneakers. After he did, he straightened himself up to use the toilet. But he couldn't.

Nikitas saw a sign scotch-taped to the tile wall: “CAUTION! TOILET SENSITIVE”. He looked down into the toilet: the long white oval face, the big drooping mouth right in the center. And Nikitas could swear he saw two eyes—tiny flickers of white light—dotting the water just above the drain. He looked back at the sign: “SENSITIVE”. He looked back at the face of the toilet.

It feels bad, Nikitas thought, because of what everyone does in it.

Nikitas pulled up his pants, splashed his hands under the faucet, and, without drying them, ran from the bathroom, a little bit scared.

In the minivan on the way home, Nikitas tapped his foot like the drummer in a band from one of the detective movies he watched with his father, which he didn't always understand but liked anyway, painfully awaiting relief. Bruce stared at his foot the entire ride, transfixed. When his mother pulled into the driveway, Nikitas slung open the minivan's door, jumped out, and sprinted into his house where the toilet wasn't as sensitive.

That night, Nikitas lay in bed with his mother and asked her to draw a picture.

“Wouldn’t you rather draw it?” she asked, thumbing through some magazine with a picture of a woman smiling over a roasted chicken on the front.

“I like it when you draw it,” he said.

“I know you do,” she said, trading the magazine for a small spiral notebook on the bedside table. “Okay, what do you want me to draw?” she asked.

“You know,” Nikitas said, pulling the blanket up over his mouth and nose so that just his brown, not red anymore, eyes peaked above.

“A person?” his mother asked, but she knew the answer.

Nikitas pulled the blanket down, revealing his perfect, scraped face. He smiled and shook his head, Yep.

Nikitas’s mother drew for five minutes, the same way she always had, and Nikitas hung on every stroke.

She must have been an artist, he thought, before she started taking care of Bruce and Joey.

Nikitas’s mother finished and held up the drawing: a person.

“That’s it,” Nikitas said. It looked like a Picasso, except with everything in the right place. Each feature was some distinct shape—a circle or oval or square or triangle.

That’s how you draw a person, Nikitas thought.

“Do you know where we’re going next week?” his mother asked, returning the pad and pencil to the bedside table, where they stayed to record required groceries or household supplies.

“To see Granny,” Nikitas answered.

“That’s right,” his mother told him. “Where does Granny live?” she asked.

“I..” Nikitas hesitated. “Island,” he said and pulled the blanket back up to his eyes.

“Ireland,” his mother corrected him—but not really, because the way she spoke it sounded almost the same. “That’s right.” She pulled the blanket back down to his chin.

“Do you remember the last time you were there?” she asked.

Nikitas buried his chin under the neck of his pajamas and shook his head, No.

“It was right after you were born,” his mother told him. “Granny took care of you. You were premature. That means you were born before we thought you’d be. You were very small, and you’d get sick sometimes, and I would worry. But do you know what Granny said?”

Nikitas shook his head again, No.

“She said the best gifts come in little boxes,” his mother told him. “And she thought you were the best gift in the world.”

Nikitas’s eyes grew heavy as he listened to his mother speak about Ireland and his Granny and her five brothers and four sisters and the farm and the tractors and the animals, and his mother hoped he would dream about them all through the night. But she couldn’t be sure what he dreamt about.

But when Nikitas was dreaming about whatever it was he did dream about, his father came home from work, lifted Nikitas in his arms, carried him to his room, and laid him down in his own bed.

Nikitas never knew how he’d ended up in his bed when he woke in the morning. He always tried to pretend to be asleep in his parents’ bed so that he could see what happened when he was sleeping, but he was never able to, because he always actually fell asleep.

A week later, Nikitas’s father drove him and his mother to the airport. He carried their bags as far as he was allowed to and waved them off and Nikitas’s mother cried a little bit (Nikitas didn’t know it yet, but someday he’d know that his mother, who never cried anywhere else, always cried at airports). Nikitas’s father wasn’t coming with them, his mother said, because he had to work. But he’d come in a few weeks, she said, and Nikitas would see him then.

Nikitas held his mother’s hand—and she held his—every step of the way through the airport. They had to, because in new places like that, Nikitas was completely mesmerized, liable to stand in one spot for hours or walk into a store or even a wall if he was left alone.

Every single thing was new: electronic boards flashing names of places he'd only heard on TV; candy, food, and magazine stores; and people—people of different shapes, sizes, and colors, in different jackets, pants, and hats, pulling different luggage and other children in different directions.

It's not that Nikitas was slow like they said some of the kids in school were; it's just that he couldn't look at something new without thinking about it for at least a little while. And while he was thinking about it, he couldn't keep thinking about whatever it was that he should have been thinking about at the same time, like following his mother or not walking into people or things—which are really important things for a kid to think about.

So his mother held tight, pulling him alongside her with her left hand as she pulled her suitcase with her right and looking him directly in the eye, demanding a response, whenever she needed to relay some sort of instruction. She even took Nikitas into the women's bathroom with her, making him stand facing the door of her stall so she could see his shoes until she was done.

When they finally got on the airplane, Nikitas and his mother sat next to each other and waited for it to take off.

“How high does it go?” Nikitas asked.

“Oh, pretty high,” his mother said. “Higher than most other things. Higher than the clouds.”

“Oh,” Nikitas said. He was excited to finally see what the clouds were made of, but he was a little worried too—if they really are cotton, he thought, we might get stuck.

A woman in a blue vest and a white shirt walked around the plane and asked people what they wanted to drink. Nikitas told her he wanted a soda. His mother wasn't thirsty. The woman asked Nikitas if he cared what kind of soda it was. He said that he didn't, and she walked away to get it for him.

“You didn't say they had soda,” Nikitas said to his mother.

“Pretty good, huh?” she said.

“Uh huh,” Nikitas agreed and smiled.

“And a movie too,” his mother told him.

“Really?” Nikitas asked. He loved movies—not just scary ones and Cowboy ones and detective ones, but all of them.

His mother shook her head and said, “Aye.”

“What?” Nikitas asked.

“Aye, Nick, a movie,” she said (Nikitas would hear his mother say “aye” instead of “yes”, which he sometimes heard her do on the phone, for the rest of the summer).

“Oh, yeah, ” Nikitas said. “What movie?”

His mother shrugged her shoulders and said, “Ask the lady.”

Nikitas turned to the aisle and saw the woman in the blue vest holding his soda.

“What movie?” Nikitas asked.

“Oh, you know what?—I’m not sure,” she said. “But I’ll go check on that for you right now.”

The woman in the blue vest unhooked Nikitas’s tray from the seat in front of him and put his soda and a plastic cup full of ice on top of it. Then she cracked open the soda and started pouring it into the cup.

“Um...” Nikitas said and turned to his mother.

“Is everything okay?” the woman asked.

Nikitas said something to his mother that the woman couldn’t hear.

“He likes the can,” his mother said to the woman.

“Okay,” the woman said and stopped pouring the soda. “I’ll just leave it right here. And I’ll let you know about that movie in just a minute.”

Nikitas turned from his mother to the soda. A little bit of the soda was already in the cup. Nikitas picked up the cup and leaned the plastic rim against the can’s tin top, trying to pour the soda back in. The ice from the cup—and the soda with it—spilled all over the tray.

“It’s the same soda, Nick,” his mother said, reaching down to her feet for her purse. She dropped the purse on her lap, reached inside, and pulled out some tissues. She mopped up the soda, picked up the ice cubes, and put the soaked tissues and ice back in the cup.

“Thank you,” Nikitas said.

His mother put the purse back down by her feet and didn’t say anything.

“Sorry,” Nikitas said.

“It’s okay,” she said.

The woman in the blue vest walked back up alongside Nikitas.

“It’s *Joe Versus the Volcano*,” she said, “with Tom Hanks...I’ll get that out of your way.” She grabbed the cup with the tissues and ice cubes and walked away.

Nikitas quickly finished whatever soda was left in the can.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he told his mother.

“We’re about to take off,” she said. “Can you wait until we’re in the air?”

“I really have to go,” Nikitas said.

“Okay,” his mother said. “Excuse me?” she raised a hand towards the woman in the blue vest. “Does he have time to use the bathroom?”

“Quickly,” the woman said.

Nikitas’s mother unfastened his seatbelt and they both moved from their seats up the aisle towards the bathroom.

Nikitas and his mother reached the door of the bathroom—it was the littlest bathroom door Nikitas had ever seen and it didn’t even have a knob.

“How do I...?” Nikitas started to ask, looking up to his mother.

“There’s someone in there,” his mother said. “See, the thing is red. Just wait.”

“Okay,” Nikitas said.

In a few minutes, the little door collapsed into itself and a fat man came squeezing out. Nikitas and his mother had to move back to where more women in blue vests were making coffee and throwing away soda cans in order to let the man pass.

After the man started down the aisle, Nikitas’s mother said, “Go ahead.”

Nikitas stepped in and turned, looking up at his mother. “I don’t know how to...” he started to say.

“Here,” his mother said, unfolding the little door shut. “Just knock when you’re done. I’ll be right here.”

“Okay,” Nikitas said from inside the bathroom. He turned around, looking at the little sink and soap and all the things he’d never seen before—or never seen in that shape and size before—and settled on the little toilet. A small sign rested on the wall above it, but this one wasn’t taped or handwritten; this one was part of the wall. It said:

“CAUTION! EXTREMELY SENSITIVE. PLEASE DO NOT FLUSH PAPER TOWELS”.

Nikitas could hardly look down into the little toilet. He almost started to cry—it looked so sad. That fat man probably didn’t even care, he thought.

Nikitas turned around, his bladder still full, and knocked lightly on the little door.

His mother pushed the door in. Nikitas stepped out in front of her and they walked back down the aisle. They sat and fastened their belts as the plane started to roll.

“How long does it take?” Nikitas asked his mother.

“The flight? About six hours,” she said.

Nikitas stared down into his lap, tapping his foot.

“But it doesn’t feel so long,” she said. “Especially with the movie and food and everything.”

The plane started rolling faster and faster, and everything started shaking, and Nikitas tapped his foot to beat the band, until, suddenly, nothing was shaking any more. Nikitas stopped tapping and looked out the window—the ground was turning sideways and everything on it was shrinking.

“Are we flying?” Nikitas asked his mother.

“Aye,” she said and smiled.

Nikitas couldn’t look away from the window as the plane climbed and climbed and everything on the ground got smaller and smaller. Soon, he couldn’t see anything on the ground and the windows got very foggy.

“Smoke?” Nikitas asked his mother, worried that there may have been some sort of malfunction, like in the movies.

“No,” she said. “Clouds.”

“Clouds,” he repeated as the windows got foggier and foggier, and eventually they were snow white, like they were flying through a carton of milk. Nikitas couldn’t tell whether or not they were even moving any more.

Are we stuck? he wondered.

But then the windows got less foggy and the blue sky bled through the white and Nikitas could see little beads of water streaking the glass.

They *are* made out of water, he thought, as he sunk back into his chair and his corduroy pants started to soak.

He looked down at his lap then up at his mother.

She looked at his pants, tan turning to brown. “Nikitas,” his mother said, breathing heavily.

“I couldn’t...” Nikitas said, his eyes starting to water.

“What?” she asked.

“I couldn’t do it,” he said.

“Couldn’t do *what?*” his mother almost screamed, and everyone who wasn’t wearing headphones turned their way.

“The toilet was sensitive,” he said. “Like me.”

“*Sensitive?*” his mother barely mouthed the word.

Nikitas dropped his chin to his chest and started to sob.

Nikitas’s mother pulled his head into her chest and stroked his shiny black hair. “My Nick,” she said. “Oh, my Saint Nick.”

THE END