

STANDARD DEVIATION*

Anil Menon[†]

There is a circle. “Inside” is the sandpit. “Outside” is the school’s rust-brown yard, yellowed weeds and solitude. Nicholas Lantern sits on the outside, finger-tracing smiles on the resistant ground. He tries to estimate, through the circle’s shifting gaps, the progress that has been made on the sandcastle. The turrets look great, the door has been set, the playing-card windows are in place and the moat is being dug.

“I’ve got stones for the moat,” he offers, and indeed he has; a little green bucket filled with ovoid, dark gray pebbles just perfect for filling moats. But the kids ignore him.

He leans back on his arms, palms flat against the ground, and gazes upwards at the deep blue sky with its cotton-puff clouds. One combination looks like a bear, rather like Baloo from *The Jungle Book*, but with tennis shoes and a floppy hat. The thought makes him laugh.

The other eight year olds – ten in all, boys and girls – are startled out of their play.

“It looks like Baloo!” he tells them, eagerly pointing upwards. “Only whiter.”

They glance upwards and then at each other.

“I’m going to the circus tonight,” adds Nicholas, trying to fill the hostile silence. “I bet it’ll have dancing bears.”

He sees the oldest boy, Pot, looking at the stones he has collected. Pot is the key to acceptance; a rotund, red-faced key with a penchant for torture.

“Here, take them,” says Nicholas eagerly, and attempts to step through the circle with his bucket of stones as a protective talisman.

Pot seizes the bucket, and the other kids get to their feet. Nicholas is a little scared of their glittering eyes, the swaying frond of heads, arms and legs. He thinks of a many-headed snake.

His mother, Radha, prays to one. It is a secret though. Last year when his father, Thomas, was taken to the hospital, she’d frantically rummaged around in the bedroom closet and retrieved an old gilt-edged picture. It showed a gigantic, many-hooded, coiled black snake with a blue man stretched out over the coils. The blue man didn’t look frightened at all and was smiling to prove it.

His mother’s prayer had sounded like the tumble of irregular stones in a tin can. He’d tried to imitate her: eyes closed, palms in namaste-pose and mumbling in

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nonsense speak. But she had slapped down his hands and wouldn't let him pray in Tammy (which is what she seemed to call her secret language).

"It's just an old habit, Nicholas. Not for you."

Nicholas wonders if Tammy has prayers for dealing with this sort of snake as well.

"You're going to the circus?" asks Pot. "Why? Are they in need of a monkey?"

The other kids burst out laughing. Nicholas laughs along gamely.

"Maybe you can be their pet monkey," says Pot, greatly cheered by the laughter. "Be a monkey, Nicky. C'mon, monkey. C'mon."

Nicky hunches down, scratching himself and sniffing body parts. He is always able to make his father laugh. Maybe I am in after all, thinks Nicholas, and play-acts even harder.

He is completely taken aback when they start to throw the pebbles at him.

#

It is a strange fact that people dislike arguing in elevators. Thomas and Radha never argued in front of Nicholas, never in public and certainly not in elevators. So they were not arguing in the elevator. But their bodies saw it differently; six inches of separation between elbows, stiff expressions, a throbbing headache (Radha) and nagging nerve pinches (Thomas).

The elevator was headed upwards for the seventh floor of Columbia's Neurological Institute.

"I shouldn't have agreed," thought Thomas. "Why did I let her talk me into getting Nick tested?"

But it was a rhetorical question.

"What harm can it do?" Radha had exclaimed in exasperation. "If they say he's normal, then great. If he isn't, then we can do something about it."

"It's the principle of the thing."

"What principle?"

"There's no need to shout."

"I'm not shouting," she'd shouted. Her anger had tripped up the faux American accent she affected.

"All I'm saying is," said Thomas, aware that he'd lost this argument, "we don't let other people decide what's normal—"

"Of course society decides. We decide. It's our *responsibility* to do so. We're his parents. He's going to fit in. I know what it's like not to. You don't. OK?"

That had finally silenced Thomas. He flexed his neck gingerly to ease the sharp pinch somewhere north of his shoulder blades.

The elevator was crowded, and everyone stood facing the door. Everyone, that is, except Nicholas. He stood facing the crowd, silently examining the faces arrayed before him; incipient smiles danced at the corners of his mouth. Thomas could tell people were getting a little freaked out.

"Turn around, Nicholas," said Radha.

"Why?" asked Nicholas, flexing his neck in imitation of his father.

“Because,” said Radha with a wry apologetic smile at the other people. He’s being difficult, said the smile. One of those days.

Nicholas was thinking about how funny it’d be if different floors required different poses. What if people had to stand sideways on odd numbered floors? Or on one leg? What if you were required to stand with hands on hips in elevators? That would be way too funny. He burst into peals of laughter.

“Nicholas!” hissed Radha.

“It’s all right,” murmured Thomas. He pulled the boy towards him, turning him around. For some reason, it seemed to profoundly disturb Nicholas. He wriggled and struggled violently throughout the rest of the short ride.

“This is the sort of weird thing that gets him in trouble,” said Radha, when they got off. She sounded more thoughtful than bitter.

“So?” Thomas gave her an angry frown. They had a pact not to discuss Nick as if he were not there. “He’s a kid, that’s all. Kids have weird perspectives on things.”

Nicholas looked up at them with an anxious smile. Thomas ruffled his head, and Nick’s smile widened. Dad was always cool.

“Nothing registers on him,” mused Radha with the same thoughtful expression. It was as if she hadn’t heard Thomas. “No matter what the situation, he remains the same. He’s always stepping into the same river. Once, twice, thrice . . .”

“There are worse problems to have,” said Thomas curtly. He looked for Room 720, the room where Nick was scheduled to be tested. MRI, PET scans, personality assessment, the works.

Nicholas laughed. Radha bent down and turned the boy to face her. Her voice was urgent. Desperate.

“*Why* did you laugh just now, Nicholas? What was so funny?”

“Leave him alone,” said Thomas.

“Circus,” announced Nicholas, tugging at Thomas’ trousers. “We’re going to the circus tonight, aren’t we, Dad?”

“Yeah, kiddo, we sure are,” said Thomas with a smile and again ruffled Nicholas’ hair.

Nicholas had a grand old time at the Institute. They slid him into various instruments, showed him Chaplin movies, wired him up with cold gel pads, shone lights into his eyes and tapped his funny bone. He was also asked to do boring stuff: read this, do these sums, count backwards from 35, and so on. Nicholas made up answers just to get the damn tests over. He wanted to get back to the funny movies; they’d made him laugh so hard he’d nearly peed. In fact, he *had* peed, but the medics had been real nice about it.

#

What Nick wants to know is why the whole world is not a circus. He asks his father that question, and Thomas laughs, which in turn makes Nick laugh. At first, it’s just to keep company, but then Nicholas imagines his father going to work in a clown costume (farting briefcase, rubber nose, the works), and he just can’t stop laughing. The smile slowly disappears from his father’s face.

“That’s enough,” says Thomas, shortly.

Radha bends down; there's a fierce expression in her eyes, and Nick doesn't understand exactly what has happened. He smiles at his mother, and he thinks her expression softens, but then the sternness reappears.

"Now listen carefully, Nick, you *have* to behave yourself. Be quiet when everyone is quiet. Don't make noises or laugh in the middle, ok?"

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He nods happily, not really paying attention. The world is too wonderful at the moment. Cotton candy, crazy bright lights, striped tents, elephants and adults who make sense. Holy shitpoop! Look at that guy, zillion feet tall, walking around.

"Hey dude, how's the weather up there?" shouts Nick and laughs hugely at his own joke.

"Nicholas!"

Uh oh. He refocuses on his mother. She is saying something about behaving himself, treats, blah, blah, boring blah. Her face is so close to his that he just has to touch the tip of her nose. Poing! Her expression clears, and she smiles, shaking her head.

"Monkey," she says and straightens his tie, adjusts his buttons, smoothes his hair; he fidgets and rolls his eyes.

"Mom!"

"Alright. Now *behave*."

They're seated right in the front row. Nick is waiting for Rubber, the clown. He's seen the TV ad where Rubber is walking very importantly to the microphone and bam! trips right over his shoes. Not once. But twice! Nick thought he'd die laughing. It's really hard to trip over one's shoes. Nick had to practice for hours before he got the knack of it. The main problem, he's concluded, is that his shoes are too small. Either that or he's got small feet.

"Can I have big shoes?" he asks his mother.

"Why? What's wrong with the ones you have? And it's '*May* I have big shoes,' Nicholas. Now shush."

Nick shivers as excitement's slippery little tongue works its way down his spine. When *would* it start? He can hardly wait. He rocks back and forth till his exasperated mother catches him by the shoulder.

"Nicholas! Sit still!"

Oops. He is quiet for a few seconds, but as memory fades, it is back to rocking. Finally, the trumpet sounds. Nick is out of his chair, leaning against the railing. The thunder of clapping hands is all around him as the first of the performers enter, cartwheeling, juggling, dancing: silk, shape, leap and laughter. Nick is hollering and clapping as if his life depends on it. There's Rubber! He is being chased around the ring by a small yapping dog; Rubber's holding onto his floppy trousers for dear life.

"Rubber! Rubber!" yells Nick, and for a span the width of a smile, their eyes meet. Clown grin stretched wide, so wide that Rubber's hollow dark eyes seem to be punctuation points. Then the whirligig swirls by: dog, clown, bark and grin.

#

Thomas and Radha listened with growing numbness as the neurologist, Dr. Bennett, prodded and poked the scans as if they were maps as well as game plans.

“So the bad news,” concluded Dr. Bennett, suppressing a yawn, “is that the scans show epileptic activity in the anterior portion of Nicholas’ supplementary motor area in the left superior frontal gyrus.” He gestured to an area just above his forehead. “But the good news is that a polytherapeutic drug regimen, a combination of ESM, VPA and ACTH, should be able to control it.”

“Nick has. . . epilepsy?” Thomas found it difficult to get the word out.

Dr. Bennett looked like he regretted his use of the E-word.

“Let’s just say he shows above-normal activity – by about three point four standard deviations – in an area of the brain associated with producing laughter. He’s very easily amused, as you all must have noticed.”

“Isn’t it possible the extra activity is there because he finds things funny and not the other way around?” asked Thomas.

“Let’s focus on the positive,” said Radha, in a bright silver-lining voice. She seemed to be talking to herself. “We can treat it, that’s the important thing.”

“Absolutely.” Dr. Bennett’s voice was quite cheerful. “The medication will bring the activity within normal levels.”

“But who’s to say what’s normal?” insisted Thomas.

“That’s simple,” smiled the doctor. “Anything inside three standard deviations. Maybe two.” Then his face turned serious. He glanced at his watch. “Like I said earlier, according to the psychological tests, Nicholas does not – cannot – react appropriately to situations, that is, react as people expect him to react. He’s dyssemic, to use a technical term.”

“Will the treatment change him?” asked Thomas. The glance at the watch had enraged him.

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” countered the doctor, puzzled.

“I mean, will it change who he is? His identity?”

“Tom–”

“Goddamn it, Radha. We need to know, don’t we?”

“Identity?” Dr. Bennett looked embarrassed. “That may not be a useful way to think about it. Your son has great difficulty in social settings. Is that part of who he is? I wouldn’t know. But we can, should you two choose, remove one cause of that difficulty. If he had a broken arm, would you consider it part of his identity? I think not. But it’s your call. There’s no great hurry. Think it over.”

“Yes, we have options,” said Radha. “That’s the important thing.” She looked near tears.

Dr. Bennett hastily distracted her with Web references, pointers to self-help books, soothing sounds, and quick, firm handshakes.

Later, during dinner, Thomas spooned his brooding thoughts into a single word. “Comprachicos.”

“Pardon?” Radha looked up.

Nicholas continued to organize his food into something roughly resembling the map of Middle Earth. The Sea of Rhun would be a problem, he foresaw.

“Comprachicos,” repeated Thomas. “A group of Spanish gypsies in the middle ages who traded in unwanted children.”

Radha clenched her jaw. “Who’s unwanted here?”

“Made them into freaks and sold them for entertainment. Deviants were funny. There was a market for them. Curious, isn’t it, how the whole point now is to remove deviance. That’s progress, I suppose.”

Radha put her fork down very carefully. “The gypsies, Thomas, were originally North Indians fleeing the invading Moghuls. They were often falsely accused of all sorts of things. You think the Jews had it hard? Take a look at gypsy history. You may learn a thing or two about the costs of being an outsider.”

“Can I have some more gravy?” asked Nicholas. The sea of Rhun needed gravy and soon.

“Yes, you *may*,” said his mother. The peculiar tremble in her voice made Nicholas look up.

“Oh c’mon. No need to drag out that old violin. I was just making a literary reference. Just because we can medicate Nicholas doesn’t mean we should.”

“Can, may, what’s the difference?” complained Nicholas.

To his utter amazement, his mother started to cry. She said something like how-can-you-be-so-insensitive-Tom and don’t-you-think-I-love-him and his father was stroking her hand and saying I-am-an-ass and I-am-sorry; it was a regular mushy scene. Nicholas dabbed some more gravy into the Sea of Rhun. He hoped they wouldn’t start kissing.

#

The sun is still only a curved promise, but Nick is busy packing. His knapsack contains all the things he thinks he’ll need: the Tom Gordon baseball card (for old times’ sake), a couple of sheets of blank paper (for writing jokes), matches, watercress sandwich (be prepared!), a small kitchen knife (self-defense, cooking), and his blue cowboy shirt with the faux leather shoulder patches (for good luck).

He considers taking extra underwear but decides against it. He doesn’t see what underwear has to do with being a good clown. Besides, people assume you’re wearing them even if you aren’t. So why bother? He suppresses a smile.

A mighty heave and the knapsack zips up.

At the distant edge of the private horizon, he senses a coiling darkness: emotions, thoughts, expectations and beliefs. But he has no words to haul them in for inspection, and so they remain just outside the plain wooden fence where mind meets matter.

All through breakfast (“Why Nicholas, it looks like you’ve been up for hours!”), all through the bus ride (“Charlie, my mom’s picking me up after school”), all through the now-familiar bullying and all through the teeth-grinding school minutes, Nicholas Lantern pets his little secret.

At last. 4:30 p.m. Nicholas is on the 22L. An old brown woman is sitting next to him; she smells of cumin and long-shut cupboards. Nicholas feels her gray-clouded eyes on him, and reflexively, he smiles back at her. Her face brightens and she smiles back, almost tenderly.

“Did you miss the school bus?” she asks. Her accent reminds him of his mother. He nods cheerfully, half-believing his own lie.

"Such a sweet smile," she croons. "You'll win the hearts of all the ladies, no doubt. Where are you going, young man?"

"I am going to the circus to see Rubber," he says, without thinking. He claps his hand over his mouth, but it's too late. The words are already out. He sees them drifting like a queue of elephants, bumping ass to trunk, all the way to her ears. He laughs, and she joins in good-naturedly.

"Rubber? The famous clown? He's my son! Would you like me to take you to him?"

"Si," he says, judging her to be Spanish. He wins another smile from her.

"It's a secret," he adds. She nods as if she knows all about the importance of secrets.

"I have many," she says. She begins to talk; it is almost as if she is talking to herself. Her sing-song croon shifts languages and he finds himself getting drowsy following its sibilant serpentine undulations.

"This is our stop." She shakes him awake.

As they get off the bus, the driver gives them a curious glance.

It seems natural to follow her. She is going to see Rubber, after all. There is a queer feeling in his stomach. Straight ahead, through the enclosure of trees, he sees the fluttering flags and the dip and rise of the red- and white-striped tent. It is so large that he almost loses his balance.

"Almost there," she says, and her grip is a vice. Or perhaps it is her voice.

#

Rubber's trailer reeks of cumin. It is so overpowering that Nicholas feels nauseous. Why didn't they start the vent? Light candles? Open the paper-covered windows? That's what his mother did back home.

Then there's the light. A malevolent yellow bulb so bright that it hurts the eyes just to sit under it. Now he is not at all sure if he can stay here. He tries to smile, but it's a poor imitation of its former glory.

Rubber looks different. Gone are his foot-long shoes, polka-dotted pants, humongous green bowtie, umbrella hat and bulbous red nose. He has skinny, scarred brown arms, and periodically, he scratches one with the other. But it is confusing. Though the clown has disappeared, his smile remains. White convex lips, full-stopped only by the shadowed eyes.

"So Mother tells me you've run away, Nicholas?" Rubber's voice is harsh but not unkind. "To become a clown?"

Nicholas nods. He doesn't trust himself to speak. How many days, he wonders, does it take to become a clown? Because, by golly, he's gonna do it in half the time.

The old woman smiles and Nicholas looks away. She's wormed it out of him, his address, the names of his father, mother, the telephone number. . . she's inspected his money, searched his pockets. If he weren't so afraid, he'd cry.

"It's a pity," says the old woman. "Such a beautiful smile. But he'll be missed. I think I'll call."

"Do you know what happens to boys who run away, Nicholas?" asks Rubber, as if she'd said nothing at all.

"No," squeaks out Nicholas. He smiles for reassurance but there's none to be found. "Please, Rubber, can I— I mean, may I—"

He is interrupted by Rubber.

"Bad things, Nicholas. Bad things. Do you understand? The world's a snake and it bites." Rubber makes a hooded strike with his right hand to illustrate.

Nicholas nods. But the clown appears unconvinced though his face remains stretched in a smile.

"I'm going to make a call," says the old woman. "Keep the boy occupied. Clown a little."

She smiles, and this time, even Rubber looks away. The moment she leaves, the tension seems to lighten up a little.

"Bad things. . . ," repeats Rubber. "Shall I tell you a story?"

"Please, Rubber. Can we. . . May we. . . get started on the lessons?"

But Rubber is looking at him slyly. "I am not really her son. Oh no." He puts his finger to his smiling lips. "She's not my mother. I'm a prince, you know. My kingdom lies in India. Swans, scented ice and gardens with peacocks. I dream about how it all happened. This smile—" He points to his face. "I wasn't born this way. Oh no. I was made. Can you remember all that?"

Nicholas is really worried now. Rubber is nodding and smiling, smiling and nodding. As he shuffles around the cramped trailer, he flaps his hands wildly; it should be funny, but somehow it is full of despair.

"Oh no," mutters Rubber. "That's the word. Oh no."

"Are we starting the lessons?" asks Nicholas with a quaver in his voice.

"Perhaps," says Rubber. He reassembles himself: shoes, nose, pants, and hat. Just in time too, for there's a knock on the door.

"Come in," says Rubber, listlessly.

Blue men. For a second, Nicholas half expects to see a swaying, many hooded snake but then his mind rearranges the facts, and he detects. . .

"Mom! Dad!" hollers Nicholas and rushes into Thomas' arms. It is difficult for a moment to say where Thomas begins or where Radha ends or where Nicholas begins and Nicholas ends. Nicholas examines their faces anxiously and smiles as he figures out that they are not angry—at least, not at the moment. Radha says little; wild-eyed, tight-lipped and close to tears, she's content to pat his head every now and then. For now, it's the thousand and one in-between emotions that have no listing in any directory.

"... the bus system was giving us the run around ... thank god your mother called us ... we were beside ourselves with worry." Thomas is expansive in his relief. He seems unwilling to let go of Rubber's hand. "Are you sure we can't thank her in person?"

"Yes," says Rubber in his harsh voice. "In person, if there is one. Oh yes. That's the question, isn't it?"

A large florid man – the circus manager – inserts himself into the tableaux. He arranges a photo-shoot. It'll be in all the news, and that can't hurt collections.

As Rubber leans his head next to Nicholas for the camera, he whispers in Nicholas' ear: "Remember."

#

See Rubber. How he runs around the ring! “Bow, wow,” barks the dog. The candy-stripes of the big top, the shrieks of kids, the clip-clap of applause. How they love the man who laughs. In his trailer sits a mother, hag haired and old. Oh no.

See Thomas and Radha. They are arguing again. Voices, shouts, tears and threats. Why do they fight when there’s so little cause? For a child who no longer exists? Surely, what they did was what they had to do? But guilt must be shared, reassurances must be seized.

See Nicholas. He is reading quietly. A glass of water by his bedside. Like every other night for the past three weeks, he has taken his pill.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” his father had said the first time his son had to take the pill. He’d looked so sad that Nicholas had clowned around and tried to cheer him up.

Now, there are no sounds at all in the room except the rustle of falling pages. Truly, a hermeneutic miracle are the pills. How focused his mind, how narrow his focus, how final the narrowing. A fierce whiteness now shrouds the unruly green. Winter has hushed the forest’s mouth. Nicholas is reinterpreting Nicholas.

Occasionally, he shivers. The triggers are many. The smell of spices, the feel of rubber, the rise of an elevator, the shape of clouds. The memory of laughter.