An Interview with Nicholas
(With a little interruption from Einstein)

Nicholas had seen a lot of tragedy in his short life and was not the least bit interested in him or his sister being a victim of it again. Of course, the sometimes reckless nature of Margaret threatened to make him an old mouse before his time. Since they were orphaned, Nicholas has felt obligated to be the “man” of the family and tries hard to look out for Margaret’s best welfare. He’s had little luck, however, keeping her away from Sarah’s design center where she watches from the rafters as Sarah works her magic designing and creating the Shoestring Greeting Card Company’s greeting cards. There’s a rather intricate creative process that starts with Sarah sketching her ideas and ends up on printing plates that her husband Jim and master printer Manuel use to bring her creations to life on card stock.

Nicholas is determined to learn every nook and cranny of the sprawling old factory. Old Mr. Hawkins had pretty much kept the place in pristine condition, and once it was taken over by Sarah and Jim, Nicholas was pleased about how completely they had cleaned the place up. A printing plant was no place for dirt or dust. And a dirty place was no place for Nicholas and his sister.

When he discovered the hidden alcove up in the rafters, he realized he and Margaret could be warm and safe, and those are the key ingredients of happiness for a mouse. And now that they had discovered a virtual endless food supply of kibbles that rivaled the old farm field, life was looking up. Still, he continues to stay on guard and be the scout his father trained him to be. He reluctantly took a break from his scouting duties to sit down for a short interview.

LF: So Nicholas, what does it take to be a good scout?
Nicholas: An abiding sense of curiosity, which is a very rare personality trait for a mouse, you know.
LF: How’s that?
Nicholas: I don’t want to use the word coward, but most mice are, let’s just say, extremely cautious. Don’t get me wrong. Being cautious is important. A good scout does just that—cautiously explore first with his eyes, ears, and nose before moving in. Speed is important, too.
LF: But I thought you said you don’t rush in?
Nicholas: I don’t. When I refer to speed, I mean the kind that gets you out if you need to get away or escape quickly. Now that is a natural personality trait of most mice—running away. I’m just saying that most mice don’t cautiously go in. They just don’t go in. That’s what makes scouts like my father, and now me, different.
LF: So you taught these techniques to your sister Margaret?
Nicholas: Mr. Forte, you know Margaret. She sometimes moves across the border of being reckless to being absolutely reckless. Her normal state is just plain reckless. Look what she did when she found that old seed sack and the hawk almost got the both of us. Not following the basic rules of survival is dangerous. And look how she behaves around Sarah. Boy! Drive me nuts! But don’t get me wrong, I love her dearly.
LF: I think a lot of creative people tend to focus on the immediate activity and ignore everything else around. In any event it makes for an exciting story.
Nicholas: You had a lot to do with that, I suppose. Why do you writers do that—you know, put characters at risk?
LF: To please our readers. They don’t want to read a boring story where nothing happens and the characters aren’t doing anything. They want adventure and excitement. They want to see the characters confront and overcome challenges. In my own defense, I see you out there taking some pretty big risks on your own.
Nicholas: I’m neither fearless nor reckless, just curious and careful. That’s the job of a scout—to take risks so others don’t have to. Cats may
have nine lives but I don’t think mice do, so I try to minimize the variables and always have a Plan B.

LF: Plan B?

Nicholas: An escape route. Sometimes, like when that hawk tried to snatch me from that tree, you have to develop a Plan B pretty quickly, but that’s the stuff of scouts. Fortunately, Margaret’s ropes that she weaves from old seed sacks helped save the day.

LF: Still I think you were courageous?

Nicholas: I don’t like to think of myself as courageous. I appreciate that you do, but if you exercise caution you minimize risks and that might come across as courageous.

LF: Or crazy.

Nicholas: That, too. But my father took great pains to teach me to assess the risks of doing something before doing the something. Sometimes you don’t have that option and that’s when you retreat if you can or take a different tack.

LF: An interesting perspective. Were you being cautious when you decided to explore the old factory instead of following the creek farther west?

Nicholas: Sort of, I guess. When I climbed that tree that had fallen across the creek I could see that to the west there likely were places as nice as our old village, but it was just that Margaret and I had been through a lot. We needed to rest. I wanted a safe place to do that and the old shoe factory seemed like it was perfect—empty. But that certainly changed.

LF: And quickly, too. So do you think the old building is magical?

Nicholas: I probably would have said no to that question, but after Red Hawkins came along I think there was something magical about the old place, certainly about Red Hawkins. How he could talk to us and guide us to actually work together to try and save Shoestring; that was absolutely magical. Maybe the building and the Hawkins family have something to do with it. When you think about how long it has been here, vacant and still looking virtually new. And those rafters. Straight as the day they were
constructed. I love the open design. We can be anywhere without being noticed. The rafters are highways in the sky for us. Humans generally don’t look up, you know, so it wasn’t likely anybody would see us, as long as we were careful. Had Sarah looked up, she probably would have spotted the pink nose of my very nosey sister peeking down. Can you imagine the kerfuffle that would have created? Like anything that old, the building had its weaknesses and its old electrical wiring promised to undo Sarah and Jim’s dream, especially because of that old 1943 steel penny in the fuse box. I’ll never forget that day! It reminded me of the day the machines came and made the farm disappear, and when the storm took our parents. It was another very sad disaster. There’s nothing worse than having something you cherish taken away from you in an instant.

LF: I’m afraid I know what you mean, but let’s not dwell on the sad and the negative but instead on the strength of the characters of Shoestring to forge ahead.

Nicholas: And we did that, didn’t we.

LF: Got that right. And that, Nicholas, has a lot to do with being courageous.

Nicholas: But you know as I think about it, I suppose Red Hawkins could have fixed the problem with the wave of his hand. After all, where did the new motors for the presses come from? He apparently has some pretty awesome powers, don’t you agree?

LF: He either has awesome powers or really good connections.

Nicholas: Ha, ha. Great play on words there, Mr. Forte, since he was an electrician.

LF: Ha. I missed that. Pretty good as I think about it. Maybe the magic of Shoestring comes from the characters. Maybe you guys are the magic.

Nicholas: Well, Mr. Forte, at the time it was pretty hard and scary work. Didn’t think much about magic.

LF: Anything truly worthwhile has some level of challenge, difficulty, and work associated with it. Don’t you agree?

Nicholas: That’s one of the lessons of Shoestring?
LF: Yeah. Why not? Stories should deliver a few lessons. So will you be content now just hanging around Shoestring, or do you see more adventures in the future?

Nicholas: At this point, I’m rather content with just hanging around and getting to know the place—lots of nooks and crannies to explore. Hey, wait a minute here. I know why you’re asking me that question?

LF: Really?

Nicholas: Margaret said that she spoke with you about doing another book or maybe a series even. You’re looking for what that next adventure might be? Trying to find out if I have any ideas.

LF: Maybe. Any input would be appreciated.

Nicholas: I’m not sure I’m ready to risk my life for another book just yet. I need some R&R.

LF: Do you even know what that term means?

Nicholas: Sure. It means rest and recuperation.

LF: Where did you learn that?

Nicholas: From Red Hawkins.

LF: That’s not in the book.

Nicholas: Well while you’re off writing about something else doesn’t mean we just sit around doing nothing. He was in World War II and shared some his adventures with us. In fact, he told me that I was like a soldier.

LF: Hmm. So that means there’s a backstory to the backstory.

Nicholas: See how magical Shoestring is?

LF: Well then, some ideas about maybe another adventure might be right up your alley.

Nicholas: You’re the boss, but could we leave hawks out of the next story. Maybe have Shoestring come under attack by a pack of half-crazed cats?

LF: I’m not sure a pack of half-crazed cats would be believable.

Nicholas: Make them fully crazed.
LF: Very funny. But maybe the hawk in this story has relatives who are not too happy about what you did to him and want to seek revenge. How about that for a story idea?


LF: A squadron. Great concept.

Nicholas: I’m starting to not like the direction this conversation is heading, Mr. Forte.

LF: Maybe we could have Margaret weave a parachute for you and you use it to jump from one of the tall trees to escape . . . or attack . . .

Nicholas: Yikes! I think I hear Margaret calling me. My turn to go get some kibbles to restock our supply. See you around, Mr. Forte.

LF: But I have a few more questions.

Nicholas: Maybe later. Have to go. You know how impatient she can be.

LF: Well, what do you know about that? He just ran off.

Einstein: Hey, Mr. Forte, I don’t think Nicholas is interested in tangling with any more hawks for a while.

LF: Hey Einstein, where did you come from?

Einstein: Just stopped by to ask if you’re going to interview me.

LF: Of course I am.

Einstein: Great. Let me check my schedule. As for Nicholas, I think he just wants to keep the status quo for a while.

LF: Status quo?

Einstein: Yeah, keep things the same for a while.

LF: Oh, I know what it means, I was wondering where you guys were coming with these bigger words.

Einstein: Margaret, of course. She told me about the dictionary Sarah uses and you know me, I went exploring . . . for words. It’s fun to have a new word roll off your tongue. But they don’t taste as good as one of
Edith’s cinnamon rolls. I think she just brought in a new batch so I want to go see if I can score one.

LF: A whole roll?

Einstein: There’s a thought. More likely a few crumbs I can savor, but who knows. If Manuel or Jim gets a little careless, maybe bigger chunks. Oh, be still my heart.

LF: Well be careful.

Einstein: Of course. I’ll get back to you about doing my interview.