



Storm Watch

Fired by NBC4 after a history of inappropriate relationships, violent outbursts, and ethical lapses, terminally sunny forecaster **Christopher Nance** has turned out to be the troubled niño of L.A. weather

by JESSE KATZ

THE CARNATIONS are delivered to NBC4 every Monday at 8 a.m. There are five of them—a week's worth—each wrapped in plastic, sealed airtight. To keep them looking fresh they are sprayed with Crowning Glory, a floral preservative that encases the petals in a clear, protective sheen. Since arriving in Los Angeles as a TV weatherman 17 years ago, Christopher Nance has pinned a new one to his lapel every day that he has been on the air. Something like 4,000 carnations.

If you know nothing else about Nance, you probably know about the boutonniere. It is his signature, his gimmick. As he has told the story, the idea came from his mother, something to soothe her son's nerves in the early days of his career. Wear a flower, she advised him, and nobody will notice your mistakes; they will only remember the blossom. An old vaudevillian trick. With the help of his carnation, the 48-year-old former stand-up comedian has become one of the most identifiable newscasters in the nation's second-largest TV market, the archetype of the high-octane, terminally sunny, laugh-a-minute, dandyish a.m. weather guy. He rides in San Fernando Valley parades and emcees at Make-A-Wish Foundation galas. The California State Assembly has saluted his good deeds, and the Los Angeles City Council once named a day in his honor. But while everyone has been mesmerized by his panache, Nance has amassed a long record of personal and professional misconduct. He projects warmth and trust into millions of Southern California homes, but his life away from the camera is almost unrecognizable.

At NBC4, according to numerous current and former employees, Nance has developed a reputation for profane and menacing off-air behavior, marked by sexual innuendo and violent outbursts. In an incident now legendary at the station, he once called a technical director a "cunt" in front of the morning crew, reducing her to tears. He had the same effect on a well-known anchor, telling her "fuck you" as she sat at the news desk. On yet another occasion, he shouted down the station's vice president—also female—vowing to "shove my foot so far up your ass you're going to taste shoe polish." The most frightening allegation involves a woman who became romantically involved with Nance near the beginning of his NBC4 tenure, sometimes meeting him at the station for their trysts. She later accused Nance of attacking her, first with punches and kicks, then by squeezing his hands around her neck. By portraying the woman as a deranged fan, Nance not only avoided charges but won a temporary restraining order against her. At the time she was so humiliated that she let the matter drop. But today, 12 years later, she tells the same story. "Christopher Nance tried to kill me," she says.

Her claim, rather than being isolated or outdated, reflects a pattern of abuse that has been shadowing Nance for at least two decades. In 1982, as a young TV reporter in Monterey, Nance was arrested on suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon after showing up at the home of an ex-girlfriend and slashing her with what appeared to be his car keys. The 30-year-old woman, who alleged that Nance had beaten her on three previous occasions, had a swollen right eye, a bruised upper lip, and numerous cuts on her hands and arms—wounds suffered



while trying to “ward off his repeated blows,” according to a Monterey County Sheriff’s Department report. “She was really beaten up by someone,” Nance conceded to investigators after viewing photographs of her injuries. He later pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor count of assault. A judge fined him \$300 and ordered him to stay away from the victim.

Nance’s ability to appear gracious while concealing his more ignoble impulses extends to the realm of community service. For much of his career he has been a fixture of Southern California elementary schools, urging children to study hard and believe in their dreams. According to his Web site, www.weatherdude.com, he has delivered that message to more than 600,000 young people. Usually he records his visits with a video camera, then uses the footage on his weathercast to pay homage to the kids who invited him. What viewers are never told is that Nance is running a business. In most cases, before he is willing to appear on campus, he insists that the principal or PTA invest in his line of self-published children’s books, including one titled *The Weatherman Is Coming to My School Today*. The books go for \$18 each. The minimum order is a set of 100, or \$1,800. Schools generally seem willing to pay it; Nance is considered a big enough celebrity, and more important, he has the power to put their students on TV. That, however, is precisely why the arrangement violates the most basic of journalistic principles. Nance is not only profiting from his position but also using airtime on the NBC4 news to reward his customers.

Nance’s book revenue pays for many comforts. His \$300,000 condo on Catalina Island—a destination he has often promoted on his weathercast—is held in the name of Christopher Productions Inc. Nance’s book revenue also goes to charity. A portion is said to be earmarked for his philanthropic arm, the Christopher Nance Children’s Foundation, which shares a Toluca Lake office with Christopher Productions. Because he was diagnosed with sickle-cell anemia as a little boy—and not expected to live past his teenage years—Nance long has vowed to use his fame to assist stricken youngsters. According to tax records on file at the state attorney general’s office, however, Nance’s charity has been a remarkably inefficient operation. In 1999, for example, the foundation took in about \$216,000, most of it from Nance’s annual golf tournament at Pasadena’s Brookside Country Club. Of that amount, \$3,000 went to equipment, \$6,000 to postage, \$6,000 to office supplies, \$12,000 to rent, \$15,000 to advertising, and \$71,000 to unidentified “consultants.” In the end, \$60,000—just 28 percent of the total—was left over for grants. When the foundation was formed in 1996, Nance named a board of directors whose members ranged from Muhammad Ali to Ed McMahon to future L.A. County Economic Development Corporation chairman David W. Fleming. The board might have provided Nance with needed guidance—except that he never convened a meeting, as is required by state law.

On the acknowledgments page of his latest book, Nance offers special thanks to his wife, Nicholette Norma Ortega Nance. He calls her “my editor, publisher, and best friend.” She also helps him run the

Christopher Nance Children’s Foundation, identifying herself as “secretary/administrator” on the organization’s most recent statement to the state Registry of Charitable Trusts. Nicholette will soon be on her way to jail. Until early 2000, she was the telecommunications manager for Nestlé USA, the Glendale-based food conglomerate. Over the course of four years—throughout her marriage to Nance—she placed hundreds of fraudulent purchase orders for new telephone equipment. When the goods arrived, she would slip them to her ex-husband, a man she had divorced in order to wed Nance. Her ex-husband would fence the equipment, then split the profits with Nicholette. The FBI arrested her a year ago. Nance posted her \$100,000 bail. She pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to transport stolen goods and one count of filing a false tax return. Her sentencing is scheduled for February 3. Federal guidelines call for a prison term of at least 30 months. She will be held responsible for Nestlé’s total loss: \$3,376,827.23.

“Christopher,” says a source close to him, “finally met his perfect match.”

In fact, at both NBC4 and Nestlé, colleagues have described Christopher and Nicholette in almost identical terms: charming, manipulative, flirtatious, brazen. Each half of the couple, according to coworkers, spent years flouting their employers’ rules and standards. “Actually, there *are* no standards here,” says an NBC4 source, one of more than half a dozen current and former station employees—from reporters to producers to anchors to managers—who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity. “We have a chronic blind spot to this

guy.” Nance’s colleagues say they have lodged complaints about his behavior and his business activities with union representatives, with human resources officers, and with three successive general managers. The station appears to have looked into some of the concerns but never took any discernible action—that is, until it learned about Yvette.

She was an intern, college age and unpaid. As he has done with others, Nance adopted her as his personal helper. They were seen giggling and touching last summer, carrying on in the newsroom like junior high sweethearts. What pushed NBC4, at last, to react is still not clear. One version has Nance being captured in a compromising position by a security camera. Another version has him being discovered by a private investigator—hired by the soon-to-be-incarcerated Nicholette. Whatever the case, Nance’s personal life was in disarray. Los Angeles Police Department records indicate that officers responded to a domestic disturbance at his gated Northridge residence on August 3, 2002. Nicholette accused Nance of “minor battery,” and Nance made the same accusation against her. No arrests were made and no charges were filed, but officers did seize five guns and remove them from the house. Later that month, Nance was suspended, with pay, while the station investigated what was officially termed a “personnel matter.” Several sources were surprised to see Nance gone, given his history of evading censure. But they were not surprised to see him back in October, at his “Skyscan 4cast” desk. “He



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has always said, "When the smoke clears, I'm going to be the last man standing," one source says.

Nance's staying power has been partly about economics; he and his carnation have been valuable brands to NBC4, a station whose morning news show, *Today in L.A.*, has been number one in its time slot for much of the past decade. Nance's staying power also has been partly about race; on a station that has relegated nearly all of its minority anchors to weekends, he has been the only black newscaster at the anchor desk Monday through Friday—and as such, one that Channel 4 has been reluctant to lose. "I can't discuss any individual employee records," says Paula Madison, NBC4's president and general manager. "I can tell you that we take all claims very seriously. We investigate. There is a process. But you're asking me about a specific case, and I'm insistent that I'm not going to respond to that."

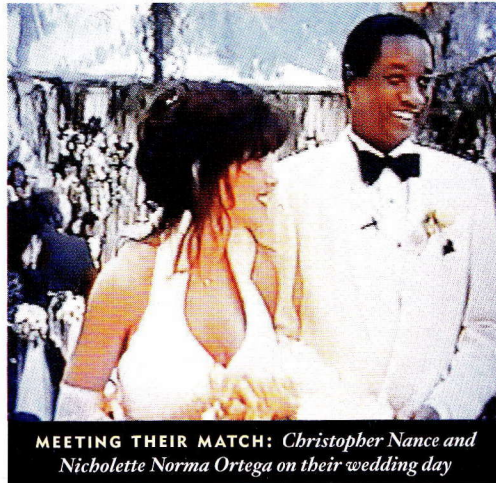
When reached at home by telephone in early December, Nance was polite but evasive. "I can't be a part of your story," he said. "I don't do interviews." Pressed for a fuller explanation of his behavior, he contended that several accusations were inaccurate yet considered it "more trouble than it's worth" to either specify or refute them. Three weeks later, just as this story was going to press, NBC4 announced that Nance was no longer employed by the station.

EVEN UNDER the best of circumstances, getting up at three every morning to deliver the L.A. forecast is not the sort of job that rewards sincerity. The weather here varies so little—and is of such little consequence—that most local TV weathercasters function as carnival barkers, luring viewers with teases and winks. Weather becomes shtick: humor, gossip, song and dance, sex. It is the toy box of the newsroom, a place traditionally set aside for minorities, babes, and white guys with comical names.

Under bad circumstances—if, say, you have been suspended for gallivanting with an intern while your wife is headed to federal prison—getting up at three every morning to deliver the L.A. forecast is a charade that requires an actor's gift for performance. After Nance returned from his suspension, he did not mention his troubles or allude to his absence or give any hint that a partly cloudy 74-degree day was not worth quivering in delight about. Between 5 a.m. and noon, during his 18 scheduled updates, he was still the same Gumby-like showman, with the same ramrod posture, the same delicate gestures, the same restless limbs. His voice was wound tight and amped up, nearly cracking as he turned the day's highs and lows into a lounge singer's riff. The surf was "bodacious." The clouds were "skit-scattin' in." When a predicted shower failed to materialize, he was quick with a pun: "Bingo, baby! I'm tryin' to tell ya, this storm's a washout." At the end of one forecast he curtsied.

Behind the false enthusiasm and exaggerated intimacy is a man widely seen as the volatile adolescent of the NBC4 family. His re-

sentment, for instance, of Fritz Coleman, the station's beloved primetime weatherman, has been an open secret for years. "If it wasn't sexual harassment, it was I-hate-Fritz issues," a former colleague says. Nance let everyone know that he thought he should be the station's top weatherman, arguing that he was funnier, perkier, and harder-working than Coleman; the only explanation for his continued morning servitude, he would insist, was the color of his skin. "He refused to even fill in for Fritz," says another former NBC4 employee. "Lots of people there have huge egos, but Christopher always seemed to make



MEETING THEIR MATCH: Christopher Nance and Nicholette Norma Ortega on their wedding day

everything personal." When Nance shared the anchor desk with the long-running team of Kent Shocknek and Kathy Vara in the late '90s, the atmosphere on the *Today in L.A.* set was frequently so tense that some colleagues spoke, only half jokingly, about coming to work in a bulletproof vest. The clash was ugliest between Nance and Shocknek, a strong personality himself. During the weathercast Shocknek would sit with a watch—at the request of management—and calculate how much of Nance's airtime was spent promoting his school visits. Just to irritate Shocknek, Nance would use the commercial breaks to trumpet his latest publishing exploits.

"God told me to go out and make a million dollars writing books for kids," he would announce. Vara, described by several people as the "marshmallow" of the group, usually tried to stay out of the way. But once, Nance lit into her, too, unleashing a string of obscenities; by the end of the newscast, she was in tears. One source recalls the day Nance flew into a rage at the morning executive producer, Carol Morton, who had trimmed back his weathercast to allow time for a breaking story. "You can go do the fucking weather yourself!" Nance yelled for everyone to hear. He was equally public when he called technical director Linda Sue Ortiz a "cunt." They were off the air, but the mikes were on. "Poor Linda Sue, she was mortified," says another source. "She thought he should have been fired on the spot."

In late 2000, NBC launched a major overhaul of the station, bringing in Madison—who had been the network's senior vice president of diversity—to restore order. Both Shocknek and Vara were pushed out, heading to CBS2 and KABC, respectively. Morton also left, joining a TV entertainment company. But their departure did nothing to quiet Nance. Within months he had called out his immediate supervisor, Nancy Bauer Gonzales, the station's vice president of news. Nobody is certain what provoked the exchange; the two had been thought of as friends. But to their coworkers, that only made the "shoe polish" threat creepier. "He sounded really violent," says one former newsroom colleague. "She was in tears. I was horrified." Bauer Gonzales is gone now, too, directing the news at jointly owned CBS2 and KCAL.

Last year, in a blunder more unseemly than threatening, Nance missed his cue during a cut-in from *The Today Show*. When Al Roker gave the signal ("Now here's a look at what's going on in your neck of the woods"), NBC4 was supposed to jump to a tape of the local forecast. Instead, the screen went dark for about 20 seconds. Nance's

CONTINUED ON PAGE 153

— STORM WATCH —
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57

voice, recorded earlier, was unmistakable. "All right," he could be heard saying, apparently in reference to some footage of small children, "let's do this one for the pedophiles." The station issued an apology, but Nance skated without even acknowledging the incident. "It's like a soap opera around here," says one NBC4 reporter. "You could write a screenplay if you hung around for a week."

The irony of these accounts is that Nance's on-air persona is so foppish and nerdy. Most of the people interviewed for this story had, before meeting him, simply assumed he was gay—an opinion, they hasten to add, based on nothing more than stereotypical perceptions. More than a few had also branded him "the whitest black man on TV," a notion not without cultural presumptions of its own. Yet sex and race are recurring themes in Nance's history at Channel 4. Long before his encounter with the intern, he was known for fawning over new arrivals, often enlisting them in his book and charitable activities. He would parade girlfriends onto the news set, giving them personally guided tours. Even at the anchor desk, he would make sugges-

tive comments to his female cohosts. "Christopher has huge issues with women," says a former NBC4 employee. "He can't figure out whether he wants to go to bed with them or kill them." Everyone knew Nance's tastes, too: white women, preferably blond. "Our name for him was 'Stepinfetchit,'" says a prominent African American journalist. "When he married outside the race, there were no tears shed—none of this 'Oh, another good one got away.' It was more like 'Good riddance.'" Nicholette Nance is of Cuban descent, but with light skin and European features. She is so proud of her green eyes that she pays tribute to them on the vanity plates of her Mercedes-Benz: IZOVGRN.

On occasion, hints of trouble have trickled from the NBC4 lot. Media watchdog Ron Fineman, a former KNX-AM news reporter, has used his eponymous Web site to chronicle several of Nance's missteps. KROQ-FM's morning sports commentator, Matt "Money" Smith, has regaled listeners with tales of how his wife—once a Channel 4 intern—used to be hounded by Nance. The *Los Angeles Times*, in 1990, even wrote a brief story about one of Nance's more turbulent relationships. But none of the dirt ever seemed to stick. "He's a magician at directing blows away from himself and onto others," says a former NBC4 employee.

Nobody knows that better than the subject of the *Times* story, which was headlined: "Judge Orders Woman to Stop Harassing KNBC Weatherman." Her name is Angie Marie. In the late 1980s, she was a twentysomething property manager still living at home with her parents near Pasadena. She met Nance, then relatively new to Channel 4, at a film-directing workshop in Studio City. "He was very well dressed, very well mannered, very well spoken," says Marie, who was reluctant to be interviewed, agreeing only because her name had already appeared in print. "He just seemed like a good guy." For the next several years, she says, the two dated regularly, often dancing to oldies at the Universal Sheraton or the *Queen Mary*. He once allowed her to sit near the NBC4 anchor desk while he

did a live weather report. At his invitation, Marie says, she came to know the station's couches and dressing rooms and other clandestine nooks. But Nance, it turns out, was also seeing someone else, a makeup artist named Lisa Gibson. He had arranged a part-time job for her at NBC4 and moved her into his Northridge home. Marie made the discovery in July 1990, after noticing a framed photo of Nance and Gibson in the upstairs bedroom. "I threw a fit," concedes Marie, adding that she hurled the picture, shattering the glass. "Christopher started to hit me. Then he put his hands on my throat. I couldn't breathe. It was the most terrifying thing. He tried to strangle me. He was saying, 'I'm going to kill you.' I looked at him, and I could tell in his eyes that he meant it."

In the end, Marie says, she was able to break free and run to a neighbor's house, where she called police. The LAPD took her statement, but this was still a few years before O.J. Simpson put domestic abuse in the headlines, and no charges were filed. Nance, meanwhile, had reported Marie to his private security patrol. He described her as a stalker, insisting he had merely "subdued her" after she had broken into his home. A municipal court judge noted the evidence was "totally at odds" with Nance's claim that he had not even had a social relationship with Marie. But with a new girlfriend in Nance's life, the judge granted his petition for a temporary restraining order anyway. Nance's assault conviction, eight years earlier, had by then been purged from his record.

BORN IN FORT DIX, NEW JERSEY, and raised in the idyllic Monterey Peninsula town of Pacific Grove, Nance grew up feeling isolated. His father, Calvin, was a U.S. Army colonel who served in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the family moved frequently, both in the United States and in Europe. "I was always the new kid at school," Nance explains in the prologue to one of his books. "Making friends was hard for me because I was very shy." Pacific Grove is home today to about 15,000 people; 177 of them are black. Christopher belonged to an even smaller commu-

nity. When he was five, he was diagnosed with sickle-cell anemia, an incurable blood disorder that afflicts approximately one in 400 African Americans. Treatments have since improved, but in those days half of all sickle-cell patients were expected to die by their early twenties, and few lived into middle age. "Son, there are God's laws and there are man's laws," his mother, Sarah, told him when he was a child, according to a testimonial Nance later wrote for his church. "Just because man says you are going to die doesn't mean that's what will happen. God decides who you are and how long you live."

Although he was in and out of hospitals almost every year until he was ten—and would later endure several near-fatal episodes as the hook-shaped cells clogged his bloodstream—Nance went on to graduate from Santa Clara University in 1976 with a political science degree. He was the Jesuit college's first black student-body president. He considered law school but found himself working in restaurants, selling shoes, and doing comedy bits in Bay Area clubs. (The vanity plates on his car at the time: MECOMIC.) In 1979, after a stand-up gig on Cannery Row, Nance was approached by a TV executive. "That was some of the funniest stuff I've ever seen," the man told Nance, whose account was published in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel's official magazine. "We need minorities in front of the TV camera—give me a call." Nance spent the next four years doing news and weather for KMST in Monterey, then two years at KPIX in San Francisco. In 1985, he was hired by NBC4 to do weekend weather here, eventually moving to the weekday edition of *Today in L.A.*, the city's first and longest-running morning news show. When he fell ill again, this time losing his gallbladder, his mother—who handles his personal finances—challenged him to reexamine his faith. "Son, God gave you a gift," she warned. "But you have not been living a Christian life, and this is His way of pulling you back."

From his hospital bed Nance made a pledge. If he survived, he would begin writing children's books. "The desire to write is so strong," he told the *Los Angeles Daily News* several years ago, one of numerous interviews he has given over his

career. "I write every day. I pray every day." He published his first book in 1995 and by 1999 had produced six more. Most of them are geared to the youngest of readers. Written in simple, often rhyming verse, they tend to have jumbo type and only a few sentences per page. Several have autobiographical themes, most notably *The Weatherman Is Coming to My School Today*. It features a little girl named Shannon who has written to a TV weatherman, inviting him to visit. When she hears on the morning news that he has accepted, her eyes grow big and she lets out a shout. But nobody takes her seriously. "Oh, I think the Weatherman is too busy to visit your school, Sweetheart," her mother says. In class the other kids tease her. "The next thing she'll tell us is the President is going to drop by for cookies and milk," one child quips. Finally, a concerned teacher pulls Shannon aside. "Believe in yourself," he tells her. Soon enough, of course, the weatherman shows up, looking every bit like Nance (with a carnation pinned to his double-breasted suit). "Let's go back inside your class and see who's laughing now," he says, taking Shannon by the hand.

The story is not just self-aggrandizing. It misrepresents the way Nance operates. His books are big business, and before he is willing to visit children like Shannon, he expects to make a sale. All the titles are self-published, costing him as little as a \$1.50 per copy. On his Web page they retail for anywhere from \$11.50 to \$18.45. "I would love to come to your school, church, or service organization and do a book-signing," he says on the site. Although Nance has always made some free visits, he formalized his book company's entrepreneurial mission in 1998, under the banner "Let's Read 4 Life." He sold it as a six-week program; Nance (whose NBC4 salary was then reported to be in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range) would host an assembly at the beginning, then return at the end to reward the top readers. At his peak he was visiting two schools a day, putting 100,000 to 150,000 students on TV every year. Sometimes he obtained corporate sponsors to underwrite the program—including NBC and Nestlé—

but if a school did not have that backing, the price was \$1,800. "We were told we had to pay it or he wouldn't be able to appear," says Claudia Contreras, a PTA volunteer in the Riverside County community of Murrieta who had invited Nance to speak at her daughter's school. She says she did not think that Nance's fee was inappropriate, only that it was not the best use of Tovashal Elementary's funds. The Los Angeles Unified School District's top reading official has a harsher assessment. "With so many quality books out there and the limited number of dollars we get for our libraries, I'm just thinking, 'Wow, why would anyone do that?'" says Ronni Ephraim, assistant superintendent of instruction. "It's just kind of shocking."

Schools do it because Nance is an entertainer. He knows how to work a crowd, to connect with kids, to deliver a serious message with enough humor to hold their attention. He also packs his own camcorder. "The kids really enjoyed knowing they were going to be on the news," says Janet Lees, principal of Granada Elementary School in Alhambra, who purchased 100 of Nance's books and placed them in the permanent collection of every classroom. They are signed "Christopher Nance/NBC." Although Nance has claimed that the station initially encouraged his appearances, NBC4 eventually tried to rein him in. Interns used to answer his phone and schedule his visits; management forbade that. His personal assistant, a paid employee of Christopher Productions Inc., then set up shop in Nance's NBC4 cubicle; management banned him, too. Still, the underlying conflict of interest—using the news to promote Nance's business—continued to fester. His two visits to Granada Elementary were made in 2001. After the second one he devoted nearly a minute and a half of airtime to the school. "I tell you, something is pretty neat in Alhambra," Nance gushed on TV. "To Granada Elementary School—you are awesome! I love you guys! Great teachers! Great moms and dads! You brought your kids up well."

As a philanthropist, Nance has also generated doubts. During the late '90s, he convinced 7-Eleven to allow him to

set up canisters at hundreds of Southern California stores, seeking spare change for his children's foundation. Tens of thousands of dollars were raised—and in return, 7-Eleven received regular plugs on his weathercast. Several newspaper accounts during that time indicated that Nance's funds were being used to help support two of his favorite charities, the Sickie Cell Disease Foundation of California and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. His relationship to both organizations, however, is considerably more tenuous. Make-A-Wish president Judith Lewis says that Nance has emceed several fund-raising events for her, usually arranging media coverage as well, but that she has no record of ever receiving a financial contribution from him. Sickie Cell Disease Foundation president Mary Brown says that Nance's inaugural golf tournament, in 1995, was a joint venture that netted her group more than \$20,000, but that the following year he decided to make his own foundation the sole beneficiary of the event. "It was a huge disappointment," says Brown, whose organization has been at the forefront of the sickie-cell fight since 1957. After they parted ways Nance gave her three donations—of about \$2,000 each—in 1998, 1999, and 2000. "Christopher Nance was really the only person in the sickie-cell disease community with the status and power to help us," Brown says. "I wish we could have had a better relationship with him. There were a lot of high hopes. But what it basically boiled down to was that sickie-cell disease was just not his priority."

Nance's Web site reports that his foundation is now committed to assisting children suffering from all kinds of life-threatening illnesses, from sickie-cell to cancer to AIDS. The foundation "provides parents with the ability to stay at hospitals with their critically ill children." It also contributes directly to "researchers who are well on track in search of cures." A more specific accounting is difficult to come by. Not only did the people listed in his incorporation papers as directors of the board never meet, but most—including his manager and his banker—were not even informed that

they had been named as directors in the first place.

Born with a death sentence, Nance often has used his illness as an excuse and a license—to prowl, to remain his mama's boy. "Christopher creates his own problems," says a source close to the family. "I think a lot of it has to do with him having never known how long he was going to live. He doesn't think of the future. It's almost like every day is his last." According to several friends, this is how he justifies his failings as a father. His only child, Noella, is 19, a former model who has appeared in *Elle*, *Flirt*, and *Her World* magazines. Her mother, Nancy Noel, is an estate planning attorney in the Palm Springs area. For the first three years of Noella's life Nance denied paternity; only after it was established by a court-ordered DNA test did he agree to pay \$400 a month in child support. Noella's mother considered demanding more, according to Riverside County Superior Court records. But in a 1997 declaration she contended that Nance had "threatened to hire someone to have me killed" if she sought to increase his payments. Father and daughter remain estranged. When Nance's older brother Cedric died last September, the obituary in the *Monterey Herald* mysteriously referred to Noella as *his* child, not Christopher's.

"She's a jewel, and he doesn't even see it," says another source. "That's the true irony here. He's made all this money off of children's books, and I doubt he's ever even read a story to his own daughter."

THEY MET AT A BOOK FAIR. Not the kind that draws readers or literati, but a fund-raising event. It was hosted by Nestlé, the world's largest food company. Every year the corporation invites authors and dealers to show their wares at its Brand Boulevard headquarters, a sale that benefits Nestlé's extensive adopt-a-school program. Nance was there with his first book, doing business, signing autographs. Nicholette wandered down from her tenth-floor office. At the time, 1995, she was known as Norma Ortega, the name on her birth certificate. She

was 29, the youngest daughter of Cuban immigrant parents. Everything about her signaled ambition—the newly straightened teeth, the Nordstrom wardrobe, the tiny green Mercedes roadster. “Christopher was smitten, of course,” says a source who knew them both. “She was so beautiful. I don’t know a man who wasn’t in love with her.”

There was just one problem: Norma was married. She had met her husband a decade earlier while working at Bekins, the moving and storage company then based in Glendale. Raymond Paul Novak ran the telecommunications department. Norma was his secretary. Nineteen years her elder, Novak was gray haired, with glasses and a pocket protector. He had suffered from polio as a child, and his left leg was painfully atrophied, sometimes requiring a crutch. He wore double-knit suits. “She has a real knack for picking people she can manipulate and control,” says a former Bekins coworker. With Novak’s blessing, Norma began taking business trips, treating herself to jewelry, clothes, and furniture. She put all her extravagances on expense reports. Novak signed them. In 1986, Bekins fired them both. The company, hoping to avoid publicity, did not press charges. But it did order Norma to pay back the losses, putting her on a monthly installment plan.

Novak found a job doing similar work at the May Company, Norma at Nestlé. They bought a home in Valencia. In 1988, they married. Like Nance at NBC4, Norma was an antagonistic presence at Nestlé, where she eventually headed a department of seven or eight employees. Men—especially her supervisors—adored her. Women—and mostly it was women who worked under her—seethed. They complained that she was vindictive, creating rivalries, stoking jealousies. A few took their concerns higher in the company. “We had women in and out of human resources all the time,” says another Nestlé source. “There were road signs all along the way.” Although Norma had always presented a dazzling exterior, she underwent a makeover after she met Nance. Her skirts got shorter. Her breasts got bigger. Soon she was intro-

ducing herself as Nicholette. “She had decided that Norma was too frumpy of a name,” says another coworker, “that she needed something more glamorous.”

A year after meeting Nance, Nicholette divorced Novak. A year after that, on December 6, 1997, she and Nance were married at the Universal City Hilton & Towers. The wedding was polished and tightly choreographed—NBC4 even aired a clip on the evening news. He wore a white double-breasted tux, with a black bow tie and a yellow rose on the lapel. She wore a shimmering low-cut gown, sleeveless and backless, with a high collar and a slit up the thigh. Their first dance was to Peabo Bryson’s “Shower You with Love.” They had taken ballroom lessons together but moved awkwardly, as if counting the steps. A few minutes later the newlyweds stood at a microphone, addressing their guests. Nance saluted his spiritual guide, Jack Hayford of the Van Nuys-based Church on the Way, repeating the pastor’s prenuptial homily. “He said the worst day of your married life will be this first day—because, as in love as you guys are and with the blessings you’ve been given from God, it’ll just get better every day,” Nance told the crowd. He paused, looked skyward, then smiled. “If this is the worst day, thank you, Big Guy.”

By the time of the wedding, Nicholette had been stealing from Nestlé for two years. She would continue for two more. The company was growing fast, scrambling to automate its systems, and she discovered she could simply walk off with old telephone equipment, slipped into a shopping bag, without anyone catching on. She delivered the goods to Novak, usually in the parking lot of the Robinsons-May store in North Hollywood. He sold them for about half their value on the secondary market. In the beginning they split the proceeds fifty-fifty. But Nicholette saw an opportunity to expand. As a manager, she had the ability to sign for purchases of up to \$25,000 without a supervisor’s approval. Soon she was ordering new circuit boards several times a month; Novak again fenced them for her, but now she wanted 75 percent of the take. The year she married Nance turned out to be Nicholette’s most lucrative. Her

legitimate income was \$109,781, according to court documents. Her illicit income was another \$397,580. Given a total loss to Nestlé of more than \$3 million, Nicholette probably netted at least \$1 million over the course of the scheme.

Prosecutors say they have no evidence that Nance was involved with or aware of the crimes. Nicholette must have had him bewitched. Toward the end of her time at Nestlé she was running Nance’s publishing and philanthropic operations. She presided over his golf tournaments, using her Nestlé underlings to help collect the donations. She used some of the same employees to count and bag the coins that 7-Eleven had collected for Nance’s charitable fund. She redeployed a Nestlé contractor, turning him into Nance’s personal assistant. While all this was going on, Nestlé was participating in Nance’s reading program, buying his books for its adopted schools. “He’s not kosher,” says a source close to both. “But she’s *really* not kosher.”

When Nestlé finally took notice of Nicholette’s expenditures, she resigned. Her last day was February 7, 2000. Nestlé notified authorities soon after that, but the paper trail was so long and convoluted that the FBI and the IRS would need more than a year and a half to make an arrest. Novak was the first to be sentenced. In December he received a two-year prison term. Under the concept of joint and several liability, he was held responsible, along with Nicholette, for Nestlé’s loss. The judge put him on a payment plan of \$1,001 a month. Nicholette is facing a longer term—between two and a half and three years—because, unlike Novak, she betrayed the trust of her employer. What about Nance?

Here was a dapper, cheery, richly compensated TV personality with a penchant for wishing others “Happy Weather!”—and after waiting until his forties to marry, he picked as his bride a swindler. Her arrest was not just embarrassing; it undermined Nance’s credibility, the benevolence and coziness he had spent a lifetime working to exude. After years of mistreating women, he was at last played by one who was more shameless than he.

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