

Sorting through two forms of stupid

by Joe Bardin

Long have I wished that my eyebrows had not grown together in high school. Numerous are the times I've gazed in the mirror hoping to see those particular hairs sprouted on the bridge of my nose not quite so prominent, nor so dark. The technology, I know, exists to rectify the situation. Tweezers have been shown to effectively address such cases, as well as waxing, and even just the razor I use to shave.

But the longer I live with that unibrow, the further I get from plucking it. Because that means something is “wrong” with me, and being wrong means not being right. And not being right is a form of death in life. Compounding my predicament, I've already done several years with this unibrow, so there would be retroactive wrongness to figure in as well. No thank you.

Though unready to do away with my unibrow, I am somehow prepared to walk into Phoenix modeling agencies and offer my services. This odd enterprise started in Tel Aviv, where I met R—, my beautiful blue eyed, half Moroccan, half Lebanese Israeli-born bride. There optimism bubbled over, perhaps into folly, and I'd leveraged my “American” looks to get signed with an agent. I connected with an excellent photographer, borrowed some clothes and was able to produce some passable portfolio shots. Sent to several auditions, I never got a job, but as a striving, unpublished poet, that felt familiar somehow and more or less comfortable.

Does modeling come easily to me? Am I made for the camera? Not exactly. When I pose for a shot, I feel, well, like a poser, really. Were I to reflect on this further, I might quickly conclude that my prospects for this field are extremely limited. But I'm shifting out of a very suppressed existence and frankly feel stupid doing many things I'm now trying on for size, like, for example, expressing my

feelings, out loud, in the presence of others, more or less in real-time, rather than after days and weeks of line-editing. I find it impossible to differentiate between feeling stupid merely because I'm venturing into new territory, or because, in fact, I'm doing something stupid.

To R—, the very fact that I have reservations about applying to modeling agencies means that I *should* do it. She constantly champions this sort of thinking for which I seem to have no sturdy defense. Because of R— I wear crotch-clinging black tights to a party. Because of R—, I eat medicinal mud and sign up to be a distributor of blue-green algae, of which I of course sell none. Which all serves to further blur the line between the two distinctly different manifestations of *stupid* I'm experiencing.

In Phoenix, I sign with the second biggest modeling agency after being snubbed by the first. They soon figure out I'm better in front of a live audience, than a camera. Indeed, I feel considerably less foolish connecting with actual people, relieved by the immediacy of it, as opposed to the contrived delay of the camera. The first time I step out on a catwalk in a suburban mall, the energy of the hundred or so pairs of eyes on me nearly knocks me over. I walk as if into a stiff wind, modeling that season's Gap and Guess jeans, jackets and t-shirts, just managing to stay upright.

More little mall shows follow and I start to find my groove. I inject, I think, subtle irony into my walk, probably invisible to the naked eye, which placates the intellectual in me, as if I'm really doing some kind of performance art only I can see. I become quite a ham.

Ambition stirs in me. Maybe modeling holds more for me than I've suspected? I approach the number one agency again, the Ford Agency's Southwestern outpost, Ford/Robert Black. Robert Black himself kindly remembers me from the first time I came in, and agrees to sign the new, more seasoned talent I've become on one condition. Pointing at the bridge of his nose instead of mine, says: "this has to go."

I'm ready. More than ready. Perhaps I've been waiting to hear this since high school. Perhaps this is my whole reason for getting into modeling, where my self-consciousness so blatantly clashes with the business at hand. My unibrow becomes two, and I vow to keep the trail between them open from now until forever.

I'm elevated to wedding shows, massive affairs held at the Phoenix Convention Center where prospective brides and grooms shop for all things matrimonial. We do three or four shows in a day; the melody of "Love is in the Air" becomes imprinted on my psyche. Soon, I'm selected to wear the orange and purple Phoenix Suns vest, coyly concealed beneath my buttoned black tuxedo jacket, which I flash as I hit the end of the runway in a crowd-pleasing moment that concludes the show.

The undoubted high point of my modeling adventure is a Coach show in 1994 or 95, presenting the new line of bags and accessories to their national sales team. Each handbag is inexplicably built into an elaborate headdress, fantastically accented with colorful flowers and fruit. The girls, crowned with this remarkable headgear, walk up and down the runway, each escorted by one of us guys.

It's a fittingly ridiculous finale. Walking down that runway in the ballroom of a Scottsdale resort, beside a beautiful girl with a fabulous Coach bag blossoming out of her cranium, I know for certain that I've ventured beyond boundaries of separation and silence genetically encoded in my body. I may be a perfect fool, but I'm a true free agent, and living to tell about it.

