

Life of the Mind

by Ryan Mazer

ME

On a crisp winter afternoon, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the river and, awed by my greatness, lunged in. Unfortunately the water was frozen, so not only did I fall flat onto the ice, but a tiny shard of it pierced my eye, causing severe damage to my retina. Later I was fitted for glasses, which allowed me to better see my reflection before future dives. It looked great.

BROTHER

My brother used to call after me on my way to the river, but I would pretend not to hear him and jump in just the same.

Desperate for friends, he joined every club at school, and each day dressed himself with stickers from the various groups. The stickers usually conflicted with each other, producing a style that confused most of the students while managing to impress the school's hipster population.

DAD

My dad was a noble man. He refused to leave behind his possessions in the wake of disaster, and after an accident on the highway once, he stayed in his car as it was towed to the repair shop.

"A loser isn't someone who doesn't come in first place," he used to say. "A loser is someone who doesn't try. Sports. A loser is someone who doesn't try sports."

But neither I nor my brother was ever good at sports, which I think is probably why I've developed such anxieties, and why my brother became a transsexual.

MOM

My mom caused my dad's car accident. I suspect it was intentional, too, and I say that only after a troubling incident that took place a few years later.

She was driving me to school, and I was telling her about a class project. Suddenly, she swerved into oncoming traffic. I fought for control of the wheel, but she wouldn't let up. I seem to recall, also,

that she was laughing. At the last second, I was able to steer the car back to the right side of the road. I asked my mom if she was alright, and she told me to go fuck myself.

PARENTS

If free will is an illusion and God controls our actions, why does he make us go to church? Better yet, why does he make our parents make us go to church? Or better still, why did my parents not let me tell people I was Jewish?

BROTHERS

When swimming in the river after a jump, a piranha bit off my leg. I stumbled into the living room, drenched in water, missing a leg, and showering blood all over the furniture.

"Wow," my brother said. "You're an idiot."

I retorted, "Oh, I'm sorry, but who's the one not going to college?" and then hopped out of the room.

MY BROTHER'S SUCCESS

My brother had decided to drop out of college and pursue a business as a life coach. Although he never got around to pursuing the business, his business cards proved quite popular.

This was enough to make me start doubting my greatness. Feeling insecure for the first time in my life, I had begun skulking towards the river with my injured leg and then just wading in.

MY MISSION

One day, while I looked into the river, my reflection started speaking.

"I think it's a bad idea for you to stare at your reflection until you fall into the river everyday," it said. Apparently, it was tired of looking at me.

It also said that I should move on with my life, get out there and make something of myself.

"Right now you're like a tree," it said, "and if a tree falls in the woods and no one's there to hear it, it doesn't make a sound."

The idea upset me. Concluding that my reflection didn't know what it was talking about, I decided to take to the woods so I could find out for myself.

Days went by as I stood in the woods waiting for a tree to fall, and when none did, I determined the universe is cold and indifferent and that man's only hope is to buy wood chippers.

I destroyed a sizeable amount of trees with my wood chipper. This put me at ease. It also attracted interest from the local media, and caused a heated dispute between the philosophical and environmental communities.

RESPECT

I can admit that I enjoyed the attention from the academic world. That's why, upon being invited to a dinner with the elusive Dining Society, I was quick to accept. Then, immediately regretting the decision, I burst into the kitchen and begged my mother to take me to the bookstore.

I told her that I needed *Sparknotes*. I was worried that I'd have nothing smart to say at the dinner, and I figured I could always brush up on all those books I'd read.

"But shortcuts get you nowhere," she advised.

"Yeah, except where you want to go, and faster," I muttered to myself.

At this, my eyes widened.

I had all that I would need.

DINNER

The night was nearing its end as I tried to work my clever line into the conversation. But my dinner company would not stop talking.

One person would list his favorite authors and musicians, and another would answer by listing his. I waited. And then waited more. And then got tired. Eventually, I dozed off and dreamed that I was flying among the clouds. I was soon awoken, and, realizing I was still at the dinner, began to cry softly to myself. No one noticed. I grabbed onto a passing waiter, but he pulled away.

Finally, a silent moment. Wasting no time, I blurted, "Shortcuts get you nowhere, except where you want to go and faster!" and was hailed a "Master of Irony" by several confused listeners.

NETWORKING

I started to feel bad that my brother had made no money as a life coach, so I pretended to need his help, and asked if he would train me in the ways of the intellectual.

He told me that networking is the most important factor to fitting in with any group, and introduced me to Facebook. We staged a picture for my profile, which I thought was quite elaborate.

First, my brother handed me a plastic red cup. He put my other hand over the shoulders of a mannequin, then went behind the camera and, adjusting it so that the mannequin was just out-of-frame, he took the picture.

I had dozens of online friends in no time.

SCOFF'S

The next day, my brother and I met at Scoff's, a diner where beginning intellectuals could gather and practice pomposity. So read the sign.

My brother told me that if I wanted to look smart, I just had to give my audience what they wanted to hear.

"Now let's see, we need some sort of provocative opening line," he said.

My jaw dropped in excitement and I began, "Shortcuts get you nowh—"

"Wait, no! What are you doing?" he interrupted. "*I feed. You purge.*"

"I don't understand."

"Here, try, 'Not unlike our current administration.'"

"What about it?"

"Just say it."

"Not unlike our current administration," I said begrudgingly.

"Good, now snicker."

"Snicker?"

"Trust me."

"What's wrong with the current administration?"

"There's always something wrong with the current administration."

"I don't know about this."

"Come on. At least roll your eyes. Shrug. Something."

I snickered, and only a brief moment passed before a man approached our table.

"Um, excuse me," he started, "but did you just say, 'Not unlike our current administration' and then snicker?"

My brother signaled to me with a slow nod.

"Well, it's hard not to talk about the current administration when snickering," I replied.

"Not to *snicker* when talking about the *current administration*," corrected my brother.

"Of course," I said, still not sure where I had gone wrong.

"Man, it's good to hear someone speak out," said the man.

"Well, it's hard not to speak out when talking about the current administration."

"Yeah, such morons up there."

I was empty.

"Well, it's hard not to speak out when talking about the current administration," I repeated, forcing a chuckle.

Though I struggled through my opening lines, I soon eased into the conversation and before long an interested crowd amassed by the table.

SEPARATE WAYS

Outside of Scoff's, my brother told me that I had done well. I guess I was too upbeat in my thanks, because he started getting weird after that.

"Ya know, I feel really close to you right now," he said.

Not wanting to give him the impression that we were becoming friends, I just looked down and said, "Ah-huh."

"What do you mean, 'Ah-huh?'" he asked, but I had decided to stop talking for a while.

About a minute later, I looked up and saw that he was no longer next to me, but now pacing towards his car.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I called out.

"This is me," he said, indicating the car next to him. I could hear him sniffing as he opened the door.

"But I need your help," I insisted, just trying to make him feel better.

"No, I think you're better off on your own. Best of luck!"

He then drove away, laughing hysterically while tears streamed down his face.

I stood on the sidewalk for a minute, trying to process what had just happened. I then noticed my new friend from Scoff's walking to his car. He seemed more than willing to give me a ride.

INSPIRATION

In the car, the guy from Scoff's went on and on about his ambition to be a filmmaker. He showed me a screenplay he had written, entitled *The Drifter*. Its synopsis read, "A guy is just, like, drifting through life."

The Scoff's guy took me to his house. There he explained to me more of his views, like his idea that "eating meat is primitive." It made me feel a bit awkward, because he was having sex with his girlfriend at the time.

MY BROTHER'S FATE

My brother drove for miles that day. Eventually he stopped at a nice house by the sea, where he would remain in seclusion for the rest of his life. An exception to his solitude was a sign on his porch that read, "No (cough) I'm not here (cough, cough)," spelled out with glitter.

SCREENPLAY

I decided to start a career in film. I had this great idea for a story about an insomniac who is driven to suicide as his mono starts to fade. So, scorning screenplay rules, I breezed over the writing of a script and sent it to a major studio.

It was four in the morning a few weeks later when I was aroused by a phone call. This was not an unusual reaction for me, as I had always found the Cingular Sound ringtone quite erotic, and as a result, could never get many dates. (Jane Hall, a kind and deeply self-conscious young girl, was at first able to look past my eccentricity, but soon became jealous over the tune and made me

promise to replace it. Two weeks later she caught me with it at a motel and promptly called it quits.)

But at the time of this particular call, my mood was ruined by the voice at the other end of the line.

OFFER

It was the head of the studio. He told me that the studio's scriptreader, upon reading my screenplay, had grown convinced that its "complete lack of structure pointed definitively to the absence of order in the world," and one day fled the studio by somersaulting out of his fifth-floor window.

The head of the studio felt indebted to me, having always hated the scriptreader. He said, however, that he couldn't give me a contract on these grounds alone, offering instead to fund some short films with which I could prove myself.

DIRECTING

Over the years, I shot a slew of short films. I made use of many devices, both technical and literary, that would become my trademarks. These included:

1. Subtitles — Challenged many viewers, as they were in English and so was the dialogue.
2. Accents — Each film containing a character who could not pronounce his *u*'s.
3. Symbolism — I revealed flaws in the academic system with gripping imagery, such as a melancholy Bill Murray being mauled by polar bears.

Overall, I explained my goal to "truly confront the audience," and could often be found waiting outside the theater with a baseball bat.

PENIS ENVY

Sometimes my thoughts would turn back to my brother. In college, his psychology professor told the class about penis envy, which supposes that women are subconsciously jealous of men for having penises. I remember my brother feeling very guilty about it, and I think that's probably why he became a transsexual.

MEETING

The Studio had taken notice of my work, and arranged a meeting to propose a three-picture deal.

In between puffs of cigars, the execs assured me that I would be able to retain my signature techniques.

"Our only concern," said one suit, "is with the accents."

"Typical," I said.

"We fear they might alienate mainstream audiences."

"Oh, mainstream audiences!"

"Yes, what about them?"

I thought this over. "I'll get back to you in a minute."

"Look, we're not asking that you get rid of the accents. Just that you...change them."

"But characters' mispronouncing *u*'s is my trademark. Without it, I am no different than any other filmmaker."

One executive crept towards me.

"Do we have a deal, sir?"

I sweated and pulled at my collar and said, "Your highness?"

The man stared menacingly at me as a snake crawled from under his pants, which he stepped on.

"Do we have a deal...or not?"

Holding my composure, I insisted, "I just really don't see why the whole...accent change is necessary."

The execs, now crowding me from all sides, responded to this by inserting their cigars fully into their mouths and spitting the tobacco on my feet.

"Very well," I said.

THE CONTRACT

Looking down at my shoes, I took a minute to consider the ethical implications of the deal.

To this end, I produced a small planner from my pocket, flipped to the section marked "Ethics," and made sure to read carefully. (Upon being asked by Don Worth, the leader of a prominent campus organization, to torch a house at a fraternity meeting a few years prior, I accidentally turned to the "Daily Schedule" page of the

planner and answered, "Remove wax from ears." Don was infuriated, and I was torched.)

The "Ethics" section stated that I could do nothing that compromised my artistic vision unless it offered money. So I agreed, thus finalizing the contract I would later describe as the regret of my life to a mirror while applying a bubble beard to my face.

Fans of my previous work could not bear the accent change and began to diminish, while mainstream audiences, too simple to appreciate my artistic flourishes, also did not show. The Studio dropped me immediately. My film career had met its end, leaving me lonely, poor, and in strong demand at a number of minor universities.

WORKING AT A MINOR UNIVERSITY

I accepted a job at one of the minor universities. Plagued by regret, I promised myself to never again buckle under pressure, a pledge that occasioned several sightings of me without pants.

In addition to public embarrassment, this new practice would also cost me my position as a Psychology professor.

HOW MY PRACTICE OF NOT BUCKLING UNDER PRESSURE COST ME MY POSITION AS A PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR

I was discussing Freud and his belief that "All men possess a sexual and instinctual attraction to my mom," when a student asked if I had yet to grade the class's papers.

"Tomorrow," I replied, knowing well that I, in fact, would never be grading them. (After asking that the students write imaginary letters of complaint to Hollywood, I was so taken by the work of the freshmen that I mailed it in a fit of inspiration. The new, more daring studio staff sent a reply that they loved the work and were currently shopping it to directors.)

The student walked to my desk and informed me that he had Anticipatory Anxiety Disorder, which meant he could not wait more than 48 hours for results or he would get a nosebleed. I was skeptical, and tried to discourage the student from using the excuse, offering, "Shortcuts get you...nowhere."

For a moment, I smiled.

"They get you nowhere, fast." I closed my eyes and opened my mouth and breathed as if for the first time.

I was almost positive I had learned a life lesson. How else to explain what I was doing with my mouth? True, I did have a stuffed-up nose. But no, something seemed different, as if the missing piece of an elaborate puzzle had been found, and suddenly, I felt ready for all that life had in store.

My eyes returned to the student, who had been staring blankly at me for the last few minutes.

Unshaken, I smiled at the student with poise.

The student stared.

I smiled.

The student kept staring.

I smiled back, now a bit uncomfortable.

The student continued to stare.

The corners of my lips were shriveling downward.

Still the student stared.

Fighting back tears, I agreed to grade the paper I did not have within fifteen minutes.

"Thanks a bunch!" the student chirped before skipping back to his desk.

I redirected my smile to the class at large.

"I'm gonna need...just a minute," I announced. I backed towards the door and, after knocking into a trashcan, made a dash for the restroom.

When I reentered the classroom with my pants at my ankles, the room was silent, with the exception of one student who queried boldly, "Uh, when are we gonna need this later in life?"

RETIREMENT

Following my termination, I retired to a quiet life in the mountains, and despite my family's fervent wishes, refused to get a hearing aid.

Consequently, when a tree fell through my roof and onto my back one night, I did not hear the sound. This seemed to resolve the "tree falling in the woods" dilemma I had for so long suffered and then forgotten when I found something else to do.

As my lungs were crushed, my conflicted mind was put at ease, and the universe decided this would be a poetic time for me to die. But, observing I was there when the tree fell, I finally realized that my findings would not count. The universe, seemingly annoyed that it took me this long, decided to kill me off anyway.

EPILOGUE

Prior to my death, I had released two modest-selling books, *Consistently Inconsistent and Other Fun Contradictions You Can Fit on a Popsicle Stick*, and its gloomier follow-up, *The Sense of Nonsense—I Hate My Life*.

Relations between my brother and I never improved. My brother saw me as someone with a crippling superiority complex who would do anything for respect. To me, my brother was a self-assured deadbeat whose failure was inevitable. But it was a passing stranger who saw us for what we truly were: two middle-aged Asian women flicking each other's necks on the side of the New Jersey turnpike.

