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## That Time I was a Bear

The world sparkled as snowflakes gracefully danced in every direction, evoking an ecstatic energy within me. I could hear the crunch of snow beneath my feet and feel frost on my eyebrows as I trudged along the snow-covered sidewalks. I suddenly realized I had forgotten my keys, leaving my door unlocked and compounding my frustration. Yet, amidst my self-criticism and thoughts of being clinically retarded, I found solace in the notion that my forgetfulness burned extra calories. The magnificence of the blizzard briefly diverted my attention from inner struggles, offering a momentary respite.

A handsome man named Samuel joined me on this journey. It was on this day that I became lost in the labyrinth of my own mind, that I sought solace in a different kind of escape.

Samuel became my guide, a companion who understood the depths of my inner struggles. Together, we ventured into a secret realm concealed within nature's embrace, a maze formed by the very shrubs and trees that mirrored the maze of my own thoughts.

Samuel Beckett wore a faded, old, long black trench coat, and underneath that, a gray turtleneck sweater. His spiked hair bore a striking resemblance to that of the plume of a Cellars Jay. Even his facial

demeanors and his inward facing eyebrows reminded me of a bird. He wore black leather boots, and I wondered if he was warm in them. We walked in silence along the path that led up to the mountains, which was just 800 steps away. I stopped in my tracks because I couldn't believe it—there was a coppice of shrubs and small tree-like plants at the base of the mountain. They were intertwined like trapeze artists, holding onto each other and forming patterns and dance-like positions. It was a still pose crafted by a genius maker. At that moment, I couldn't help but think of Samuel's presence and the connection between creativity and intelligence.

Samuel and I were drawn to the enchantment of the maze formed by the intertwining shrubs and trees. As we crawled inside, a sense of safety enveloped us, as if no one else minded our presence. I felt a childlike curiosity and playfulness emerge within me, and I turned to Samuel with a question, peering through an opening among the trees.

“What if I was a bear?” I asked, my voice filled with whimsy.

“You can be,” he replied with a smile.

With enthusiasm, I dropped back to my knees and stomped them in large, exaggerated motions, mimicking the movements of a bear. Reaching my arms forward, I playfully clawed the air, letting out a playful growl. Samuel observed me with amusement, his words of affirmation making me feel validated in my creative expression. We continued farther into the maze, Samuel leading the way, occasionally peering out of openings to survey the surroundings. I followed closely, filled with anticipation and wonder. Then, as I turned my neck to the right, my eyes locked onto a sight that took my breath away—an arch formed by the interweaving of bushes inside the dome we found ourselves in. It appeared almost magical, exuding an irresistible pull that captivated me.

Lost in the moment, I suddenly heard a familiar whisper, a voice I recognized. “Let us taunt the universe with all our dreams that will come true,” Kafka’s voice echoed softly. My mouth fell agape, and I nearly exclaimed, “Kafka!” Yet, the words couldn’t escape my lips, as the presence of the renowned writer faded too quickly for me to hold onto it. However, the encounter left me with a profound realization—a glimpse of the arch’s potential. It represented the gateway to boundless dreams and the power of envisioning greatness. Bliss, I came to understand, is not merely a fleeting moment of happiness or contentment. It is a state of being, a deep-rooted conviction that one is destined for greatness and that the universe conspires to bring dreams to fruition. It is the unwavering belief in one’s own potential and the relentless pursuit of one’s passions and aspirations. In that sacred moment, as I stood there in awe, gazing at the arch before me, the weight of the world momentarily lifted from my shoulders, replaced by a sense of purpose and clarity.

“I know where,” Samuel said and began on his knees out the way we entered.

I crawled through the arch quickly, the anticipation fueling my movements as I eagerly followed Samuel. The space on the other side felt different, as if I had crossed a threshold into a realm where possibilities were limitless. It was a place where my dreams could manifest and come true. The arch held a certain enchantment, a secret that was meant for me alone. I knew that sharing this experience would dilute its power, diminishing the magic that resided within me. It was a sacred connection between myself and the universe, a secret pact that granted me access to the depths of my own potential. Why would I ever disclose something so sacred and personal to anyone?

When I came back to the present moment in the eye of the winter wonderland, I noticed I was far behind Samuel. His strides were long and it was difficult to keep up. So I began to run, moving like a child

would towards someone they admired. He stopped to wait for me, smiling and making bear faces, holding his hands up like claws. I ran to him and hugged him. He put his arm around me and we veered off the path. I was sure there would be people hiking nearby. If I remember correctly, Chautauqua was a highly trafficked landmark, but I don't remember seeing any people. It was then that we knew we were lost.

"How did you figure out how to write something in a way that has never been done before?" I asked, looking up at him. He stood impressively tall.

"I just kept writing," he replied, "It's mostly obstinance. What people don't know is that constant rejection forces a man to make new rules."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" I inquired.

"No, not a chance," he said, with conviction, "Move two steps to the left."

"Step one, step two," he said, shuffling to the right and pulling me with him, "Dance your way through life."

"Life can be good or bad," he said, "but we must fear it when it is nothing."

"Nihilism?" I said, showing off my understanding of male intellect and the things they always think about.

The snow came down even stronger. He turned to me and took my hands and in one swift motion twirled me. I threw my head back and sent a smile to the sky. We were in a snow globe and the world was shaking us into dance. When we separated, he walked towards a large ponderosa. He observed it in detail, fixating on it with one hand on his hip and the other rubbing his chin. He seemed ready to say something.

“You must make your idea universal. If you provide meaning and, at the same time, create doubt for everyone, then you’ve done something brilliant,” he said.

“Wouldn’t it be traumatic for people to find out they all want to hear the same thing?” I responded.

“Yes. Or, “Utopic.”

“I’m a woman, and I often make things up without evidence or proof. I am too weak to complete an idea. We can’t think logically like men can.”

At that moment, did I become a man for thinking logically? Then I thought, isn’t that what every man strives for, to be unique? An original idea then seemed cliché. I started to feel that transcending humanity was impossible and that maybe accepting normalcy and being okay with it was the smartest thing a human could do.

Sam laughed. “Who told you that?”

“A lot of symbols and messages,” I mumbled, feeling defeated.

“Listen to something else,” he suggested.

“What if they’re right?”

“Whose they?” He asked.

“They’ always represent the group of people that we hate. There’s no need to make them Nouns.”

Samual winked at me.

We fell back into silence. I noticed a cluster of trees that grew abnormally.

“Do you think those trees are less valuable than the ones that grow straight?” I asked.

“That can’t be right. I’m as ugly as a mutt, and I’ve done well.” Samuel began making some kind of sound in the air.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It’s the noise birds make. You know how to attract a bird? Make this sound.” I attempted to mimic the sound but couldn’t come close.

“You’re a cute kid,” he said soberly, giving me a quick glance.

He peered at the sky with his palms open as if receiving something from the heavens. A blue jay flew into the pocket he made with his hands. They seemed to be talking to each other with their eyes. Samuel looked like a god.

“Look here,” he said.

He placed the bird on his shoulder, and the bird looked at me, chirping. He gently moved it to his other shoulder and then winked at me. Then he released it. The bird flew to a branch, lifted its wings, and flew back down onto Sam’s shoulder.

“When you believe in what you are doing, success is inevitable,” he reminded me.

The bird seemed to nod at me. The Blue Jay jumped from his shoulder and fluttered towards me and looked me in the eye. It chirped again before flying off into the distance. I was stuck in disbelief and silence. We stayed off-trail, near the slanted family of trees. We were surrounded by ponderosas that shed the smell of brown sugar and butter. Samuel lit a cigarette and began pacing. He started talking to himself as if rehearsing lines from a play. I laid back down in the snow and swung my arms up and down, feeling like an angel for a moment—it felt like something worth striving for, to become something better than humanity.

I watched him pace and listened to his string of words. My body warmed, and my heart was palpable. The sound of Samuel’s voice was like music in the background and all the while, I studied the cluster of trees

and noticed that they had all grown at a slanted angle. Falling snow formed tears down my face. Memories flooded my mind, fragments of the past allied with the present scene. I looked at the surrounding trees, their upright and proper posture, and then back at the family of peculiar ones. Each crooked trunk seemed to hold a story, a memory etched into its core. One tree grew at such a steep angle that it seemed to rest on a neighboring tree, defying gravity and challenging the passage of time. It triggered a vivid memory from my childhood. I remembered the thrill of seeking out trees with easy angles to climb on, the ones that were most useful for our endeavors and construction projects. Those trees, which may have appeared worthless to others, held immense value to us. It was on one of those misshapen trees that we built the best treehouse we had ever created, a sanctuary of our childhood adventures and shared secrets.

Then, I thought about the trees that grew along highways and roads, capturing the smog. I considered the mundane locations where they had been planted, such as shopping malls and parking lots. And then, I pondered the wild trees perched on mountains and the families of them that formed forests. Everything around me had a hierarchy. I both hated it and yet romanticized it. I couldn't help but think that I was in the same inescapable class as the average trees in parking lots. Don't we all want to be at the top of the hierarchy? I am part of the population that wants capitalism to crash. At the same time, if I knew I could climb to the top I'd want it to stay permanently. To me, Samuel Beckett was at the peak because I believed literature was the pinnacle of any intellectual pursuit. However, I found myself among the slanted trees. I was unable to grow properly. I didn't have control over my mental faculties, and, like the trees, I would never be able to move from that state physically or mentally. I would always be surrounded by the same abnormal trees, the kind no one admires. As I explored and observed my thoughts I realized I didn't want to feel this way. After all, I was

experiencing a unique connection to the spiritual world with the people I so deeply admired such as Kafka and Samuel Beckett.

“Let’s find a bear den. Let’s find a sleeping bear,” I said, transitioning from my moment of reverie. I sat up and swiveled towards Samuel, who was still rehearsing things that all sounded like gibberish.

“It’s your world,” he said and winked.

I smiled bright eyed and innocent, and then Samuel disappeared. I let myself fall straight on my back into the comforting snow. I held out an arm and scooped some snow close to me, holding it like a lover. As I lay there, contemplating all of this, I couldn’t help but draw parallels between my own desires and the crooked trees that surrounded me. Just like those trees, I too felt like I was growing at a slanted angle, unable to conform to the expectations and hierarchies of the world. I yearned for something extraordinary, something like the literary genius of Beckett.

I would give it up for the chance to be a Beckett. But amidst these ambitious dreams, a more fundamental longing emerged – the yearning for love. I questioned whether it was possible to be a genius and find love at the same time, and I feared that it might be asking too much of the universe. My identity as a writer had been a lifelong dream, one I had pursued since childhood. Authority figures that surrounded me in childhood taught me that to be something great, one must suffer and one must give up everything else. I remembered tossing a penny into a wishing well at the age of nine, wishing to become a brilliant mind. As I stood by the fountain full of pennies, I looked up at the stars and shed a tear for them, as if they held the answers to my aspirations. As I lay there, held by the snow, I questioned my beliefs and my constant need to explore the world from every angle. Would I unveil my heart for the world to see? Or would I lay the burden



upon just one person? I didn't know how to fathom the question I had posed to myself. I saved it in the depths of my brain for the next time Samuel visited.

Everything was gentle and still. When I finally got up, I looked at the face of a hill and noticed a Boulder that formed a small cave. Boredom was about to set in. I got on all fours again and pretended to be a bear, crawling up the rocky hill amidst the mountains. I clawed the long grass and roots still visible under the snow to pull myself upwards. I'm strange that in my most foolish moments, I am completely present. I hadn't thought about my diagnosis of schizophrenia at all; everything seemed normal. As I prowled up the hill towards the cave, I used my nose to pick up any scent of bear piss. I felt fearless. I raised my bear like body, balanced on my heels, and stretched my mouth. I guess when one has been through atrocious trauma, their only way to escape it is to find a different reality. When I finally collected myself, I curled up under the boulder and stayed there for a while. When boredom was no longer tolerable, I sat up and slid down the mountain on my bottom. The ride was bumpy, and I bounced up and down, occasionally grabbing onto twigs to slow myself down. Throughout, I had the smile of a child.

As I headed towards my apartment, I noticed it had been over two hours since I last ate or drank. Exhaustion gripped me like an emergency, and I looked at people with desperation, wanting to ask for help but unable to find the words. No one noticed my silent cries for help. I felt entirely disconnected from the world. Reflecting on my experiences, the peculiarity of my existence struck me. It was incredibly un-boring, yet it went unnoticed by everyone on this planet. I felt so special that day, never once considering the label 'crazy.' Meeting Samuel Beckett reinforced that feeling, and I relish the thought of taunting it over all the established people in this world. Establishment is something I might never achieve, for reasons of luck? Arriving at my apartment, I

realized my keys were missing. I had dropped them on the mountains during my literary and fantastical daze. Depletion set in, but fortunately, my landlord was shoveling snow at the neighboring apartment. It marked the first time I had spoken to another person in a day and a half. I never returned to the mountains for my keys.

During the time that led up to me turning into a bear, a random doctor I had never seen before diagnosed me with schizophrenia in less than ten minutes. To defend my breakdown, I revealed my childhood trauma, hoping it would erase the diagnosis and provide an excuse for my behavior. The doctor ignored me and went so far as to use the words ‘emotional and developmental retardation.’ I was in the looney bin because I drove my car into a tree, and they didn’t let me out of that prison for two weeks. Despite the psychiatrist’s credentials, I became convinced that all psychiatrists were quacks who merely prescribed medications for profit. I confided in my therapist, accepting the idea of “emotional and developmental retardation” but rejecting the label of schizophrenia. My therapist must have been angry because he rejected both diagnoses. He said, “You know, psychiatrists are the ones who do the worst in med school. They are the ones that aren’t good enough to become medical doctors.” From that point on, my therapist became my most trusted source, even guiding my everyday decisions like what to have for breakfast.

Whenever the memory of my day with Samuel Beckett comes to mind, self-doubt often follows. I reflect on a lecture by Jason Peterson about openness, creativity, and intelligence. Peterson suggested that creative people are often wrong, and I wondered if he was implying that most creative individuals are dumb. As I recall the memory now, it must have required some form of creative intelligence to envision it all. I feel the shame of being so insignificant in this world, dwelling on all the rejections I still have to face in this short lifetime. However, having this memory keeps me motivated to maintain profound self-love. It is the kind of

self-love that champions like Muhammed Ali must have needed to become great—an inner enrichment that manifests brilliance, empowering one to throw pennies in wishing wells with a firm belief in the fulfillment of wishes. But privately, I don't believe any of that. Peterson's words linger in my mind, much like that quack's diagnosis. When I'm feeling the weight of oppression and patriarchal ideologies, I take all my flaws for a walk and dream of a place where I am free to just be. Freedom doesn't need a diagnosis and so imagination becomes real.