

Jake McCulley

Apophenia

“Do you have friends?”

These questions have been coming for hours. There’s been blood drawn, bones scanned, cold hospital pancakes eaten, and all these brutal questions asked.

“I mean,” I croak, unable to accept what my brain is thinking, “I...yes. I have friends.” To say the “no” that I instinctively felt would be, ironically, to betray my friends, who, it seems, truly care about me in some capacity outside my understanding. Besides, I think “no” is the true lie, but it’s a lie I tell myself each day, and so I really can’t tell what the correct honest answer would be. Hopefully the hesitation and self-questioning in the answer I gave will be nuanced enough for the questionnaire’s yes/no checkbox.

The questions hurt, but my face is expressionless. Answering them has me confused, and my voice sounds weak. It falls away just before the words finish. I feel faint, need a cigarette and a strong drink. Nicole, the asker, is a graduate student in the school of psychiatry, and I’m a part of her two-year experiment on the effects of antidepressants on bone density. The questions are designed to account for any possible psychological variables which also affect bone density. As in, is my depression such a stressor that it’s

weakening my bones?

It is difficult for me to stay honest, because Nicole is so beautiful. I like looking at her eyes, or, perhaps, making eye contact with her. I know I must look pitiful to her. She stays professionally reserved, no judgment in her opaline eyes, but I know she is a human and the person in her thinks *something* of me, and considering what I've told her, pity is most positive response she could likely have. I expect a mixture of revulsion, pity, and scientific curiosity, like a forensic pathologist confronted with an especially mutilated corpse.

But even that's being optimistic; a corpse takes the shape of a human. A corpse is sympathetic. I'm SBo88, one of 200 subjects in this richly funded experiment. They call me a "subject," but of course I'm actually an object. It isn't *me* Nicole is interested in, but my belongings: memories, feelings, ambitions, habits, none of which quite add up to me. And even if those belongings are important to me, after so many extensive interviews there's simply no way anything I'm saying is of more than bare statistical interest to her. I'm as interesting as any random point on a line graph. I'm not even a standout datum; I have what they call "moderate" major depressive disorder, as opposed to mild or severe.

Knowing all of that doesn't change how I feel about Nicole. She's spent the last three hours penetrating to my most carefully guarded personal issues, and I've been letting her. And I've been wanting her to penetrate further. I want her to reach out and grab my hand, if only for a second, but I know she won't, so I tell myself I don't care. I've been staying honest, and I've been proud of that honesty, and so I've felt as if we're actually connecting in some sterile way.

"Do you often worry that you will do something socially unacceptable in public, despite your best efforts not to?"

“Yes.”

“Does that worry often prevent you from going places with your family?”

“No.”

“Does that worry often prevent you from going places with your friends or peers?”

“Yes.”

“How often does that worry prevent you from going places with your friends or peers? Almost all of the time, some of the time, or not very much of the time?”

“Almost all of the time.”

“Do you get upset with yourself for that worry?”

“Yes.”

“How upset with yourself do you get? Very upset, somewhat upset, or not very upset?”

“Very upset.”

“What do you worry that you might do that is socially unacceptable?”

“I have no idea. Nothing.”

I don't know what it would be. But I do have this constant paranoia that I'm about to black out or lose control of my mouth or my body, and I feel like if I don't exert constant self-control, if I am not constantly present to say “no” to a bunch of unconscious requests being sent to my prefrontal cortex, then I'd, like...go feral, I guess. Like I'd just rip off my clothes, crash through the café window, and either start humping every shapely leg I see or lope away into the forest, never to be seen again. That's assuming I wasn't captured and institutionalized, which would really be the worst possibility. The fear of being institutionalized is, as any civilized person knows, paradoxical, because civilization itself is an institution. But when that worry

becomes prevalent, which is often, I become very preoccupied with my body, just focusing on the constant fact that *nothing has gone wrong yet*, and I lose my ability to be really present in whatever social setting I'm supposedly in. In fact I desperately wish that I *would* lose control, that I *would* do something socially unacceptable, just so I can see it's not the end of the world like I Know in my Intellectual Brain it wouldn't be. But no, I am always careful not to do anything, especially not in public.

And see, as a Sensitive and Intelligent Young Man, I like to think of my social anxiety as almost like a badge of unique Sensitivity and Intelligence. I kind of hate that these questions are even on Nicole's list, not so much because I hate answering them, but because their presence suggests that I'm not special for having this problem, that if I'm going to be a Tortured Artist I'm going to have to find a much more unique and interesting way to suffer. What I really need is a chance to explain *why* I'm so socially anxious, so that I could show Nicole how deep that particular rabbit hole goes.

“Do you often believe that there is a conspiracy to poison you, arrest you, or in some other way to ruin your life?”

“No.” I actually laugh a bit, but the laugh is cut short as I recognize how much similarity those sorts of delusions have to my own. I have a feeling I know where this is going.

“Do you often believe that a song, tv show, or public event was created just for you?”

“Yes.” Deep shame. And probably not a lot of relevance to Nicole's study. But as much as she needs to hear this information, I need to hear it more. How was it that a few seconds ago I thought I was proud of my rabbit hole? I am not proud, I'm ashamed. But in this setting, with the hospital gown already on, the voice recorder already running, the ugly stainless steel and fluorescent box already containing me, I may as well make my confession.

Her eyebrows raise almost imperceptibly. "Can you think of an example?"

"Sure, that's easy," I say, knowing full well the example I'm going to provide isn't what she's asking for. "Do you know 'The Times, They are A-Changin,' by Bob Dylan?" It's so odd that I would bring that up. I don't even like that song that much. I guess I'm stalling. I'm starting to sweat.

"I've heard it. What is it about that song?"

"Well, the lyrics are crafted to exceed time and space. Anyone who speaks English and has a progressive heart will recognize them as being about their own moment. It's not a fact, exactly, that the times are a-changin'. It's more like a hope, or a promise. Maybe when Bob Dylan wrote it, it was literally true, but the historical facts are less important than the feeling being described. The song knows my hopes, almost as if Bob Dylan reached into my brain to find them."

"But you don't believe he was literally thinking of you when he wrote it?"

"No." Her expression relaxes minutely. I think she looks...relieved. Or maybe disappointed. Do psychologists dream of that one case study, the real aberration, the disclosure of whom will make their career? At any rate, she thinks I misunderstood the question. I was stalling. She's going to ask again.

"Okay. But so, can you think of any examples where you *did* think it was for you specifically?"

Shit. I've been honest this far. I wonder if she realizes I'm using this interview as a chance for self-exploration. I wonder how many of her subjects do the same. If we are all lonely, then conversations like this are rare opportunities.

"Yes I can. And it's going to be what the question was asking for. I don't why I said that thing about Bob Dylan, that was just a waste of time. Sorry. The most recent time it happened was on Monday night. We had a staff meeting at the college newspaper, to talk about our individual plans for the next semester. I was

feeling particularly depressed and antisocial that day, and I wasn't allowing myself to make eye contact or smile. All I wanted was to leave.”

She will understand this as something of a confession in itself. This is not ordinary conversation; it has taken on a profound significance for precisely one half of its participants.

“Anyway, two of my coworkers, Gabby and Meagan, were discussing whether we should order pizza or some such triviality, which I immediately forgot under the weight of the experience that followed. Gabby, it's important to say, is significantly more attractive than Meagan. Not only physically, although she is attractive, but she's also a persistent and effective journalist. She's good at her job, and passionate. She's professional. She belongs. If I ever spoke to Gabby, I might be able to develop a crush on her. Not so with Meagan, who for me vanishes into the background.

“So they were talking about, let's say, ordering pizza, and this was early on into the meeting but already I just wanted to run away and crawl into bed, but then Gabby and Meagan both turned questioningly toward me. I don't know why, I think maybe the staff had all voted and I was the only one who hadn't expressed an opinion, but I don't know for sure that that's what was going on. And so Gabby and Meagan are both looking at me expecting something, and rudely, cruelly, I don't acknowledge Meagan at all, but I look toward Gabby with this feeble smile, the closest I can come to flirtation at this stage in my life.

“Shortly after that interaction I realized what I had done, how I had in my passive way dehumanized Meagan. I have nothing against her, and didn't mean to slight her, so I hoped that it had passed unnoticed and resolved to interact even less, if possible.

“And you can tell I've been thinking about this a lot, can't you? I've been thinking about it and thinking about it, which I'm sure you expect anyway, as a psychologist dealing with a depressed person. I

ruminate.

“So anyway, after I've made my clumsy, sheepish, and brief eye contact with Gabby, I'm thinking about how I was just rude to Meagan but I'm also thinking about how pathetic it is that I think of my eye contact and my ugly little smile as flirting, how there's absolutely no chance she understood what had just passed between us as flirting. And I'm wondering how *does* she see me? Does she see me at all? I'm on high alert for any kind of clue. And some short time later, or I don't really know how long it was, because that whole meeting felt interminable, Gabby says “See, the street goes both ways for that one.” I'm not sure who she was talking to, or what the context was, but I know she said “The street goes both ways for that one.”

“Which, you probably hear that and you're wondering how I could possibly draw any kind of parallel between that sentence and my non-relationship with Gabby, and you get that she wasn't talking to me or about me, and in fact now I can't even remember the exact instance at which Gabby and Meagan turned to me, like maybe it just didn't happen at all. But I know she said “The street goes both ways for that one,” and because I'm extraordinarily self-centered, as depressed people are, I began to suspect that there was some Freudian subtext I was meant to pick up on. As in, her sentence “The street goes both ways for that one” was her implausibly subtle way of pointing out that she had recognized my interest in her, as in, I was “that one,” and “the street” was her metaphor for the line which had been briefly sketched between our eyes.

“It's probably amazing to you that I could interpret Gabby's sentence that way. Not “amazing,” like you think it's brilliant or intuitive, but just, like, crazy that a person could be thinking that way. Like I somehow thought she was flirting even more subtly and weirdly than me. I can't say for sure whether I really believed that. I guess I wanted to believe it bad enough that what I really believed didn't matter. At this point, although I knew deep down that I was overthinking to a degree which literally caused me physical

distress, I couldn't help but focus with laser precision on parsing all the possible social and sexual subtexts within the conversation in the room, in a vain attempt to discover whether they might have been about me. I was also conscious that this is probably symptomatic of a serious mental disorder.

“Anyway, the meeting went on for maybe five more minutes, with my brain doing arbitrary analytical somersaults to the point of exhausting itself, when the managing editor told a story. Jordan. That's the managing editor.

“She told us a story about one of her sports reporters. She was using it as an example of how we should pursue our sources. This reporter, she told us, went to weekly “press conferences” for some unpopular sport, women's lacrosse I think, and at these conferences she was always the only journalist present. It was only her and the coach, but the coach would walk up to the podium and give her speech and then “field questions” as if there was a full crowd, and the reporter would take notes and raise her hand and wait to be called on to ask questions, as if it was a real conference.”

I laugh as I summarize Jordan's story. Nicole laughs too, but it might just be an intentional reciprocal thing she's doing to make me feel at ease and continue my story. She is unblinkingly professional. If she weren't, I would surely fall in love with her, as easily as I would fall in love with Gabby if I'd ever confessed to her for this long. I would like to fall in love with Nicole, to fall in love with that playful spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks, that parallel spray disappearing beneath her blouse. I couldn't be slaked by merely fucking her, though “merely” is a hilarious word to use since we aren't even on the same plane of existence. I haven't been in love in a long time, and sustained, honest interactions like this are a rare treat for me. If I weren't depressed, the experience would make me smile. I might even become charming. But in fact, I do laugh at my story.

I think it is kind of funny, right? This coach and this reporter just going through the professional motions, unable or unwilling to act like normal people? Trapped in the narrow, societally defined roles they've chosen for themselves? Actually, when you analyze it, it starts to get pathetic instead of funny. And Jordan told us this story as an example of the *right* way to behave. “Professional” and “right” in this case being identical. It's the sort of thing that makes me think I should go feral.

“So she tells us this story, and keep in mind that I'm already feeling completely isolated from everyone else in the conference room, who all joke with each other and smile and make eye contact and just interact in a normal way, but I'm totally excluded from that. I exclude myself. I'm separate, lonely, other. Like an alien observer. I think I've already explained the alien thing, right? Plus, due to the events earlier in the conference I'm temporarily obsessed with the notion that everyone might be talking, consciously or not, in code about me, plus I'm keenly aware that I'm thinking in an insane way. But anyway, she tells us this story about the sports reporter and the coach going through the motions of a press conference, and for a brief moment I'm actually interested in what other people think of something besides me. I wonder if they're hearing the same thing as me, if this story also strikes them as humorously off-base. So I look around with my eyes and my face, but it seems like I'm the only one who thinks that story is bizarre and the opposite of inspiring. I think I even let out a laugh, but I was the only one who laughed, which of course made me feel even more alien, because of course laughter is meant to be a social behavior.

“But it was how she summarized the story that really threw me for a loop. She ended with the following sentence, which I remember verbatim because it fucked with my head so bad, she summarized it by saying “So the whole conference is fake, and it's only for one person, but they're having it anyway to try to help that one person.” She said it in the present tense like that. Go ahead and hear that properly in your

brain, as if you're sitting there and someone says to you, in the middle of a conference, “The whole conference is fake, and it's only for one person, but they're having it anyway to try to help that one person,” and maybe, hopefully, I pray you'll understand the way my brain heard that sentence. My brain heard the sentence “The whole conference is fake, and it's only for one person, but they're having it anyway to try to help that one person,” and started to think she was talking about *this current conference we are in right now*, and that *I* am the *one person* she's been talking about, and that they're *trying to help me*. And so that's why I feel so alien, that's why everything seems absurd and only provisionally real, because in fact this whole event isn't real and everyone is just acting and they're about to pull back the curtains and reveal that I've been a part of some grand social experiment. And then everyone will admit that the story about the sports reporter was a weird one, and explain that they had to do it to make me realize what was going on, and there's a whole team of sociologists and psychoanalysts on the other side of the door just waiting to tell me that I'm not insane, and they'll be able to explain to me why everything feels so wrong and this fake world I'm living in will give way to the real one I suspect, and my whole history will tumble together like dominoes. Like *The Truman Show*, basically.”

I've never told anyone about these delusions. Not in detail, at least. Nicole is the first. I'm so ashamed, for reasons I don't fully understand, but basically which come down to a stigma (at least my perception of a stigma) around that sort of truly insane mental issue, and how I've felt that my intelligence is the only unassailably good quality about me. I am a precocious individual. It is precious to me, as it has been since I first carved myself a niche in elementary school. I don't ever want anyone to question that I'm smart, so I keep a tight lid on things that might be construed as stupid, a habit which is itself stupid. I can't help it, my self-image is too delicate and too tied up in my own intelligence.

But there's a little more to it than that, I think. I think, secretly even from myself, I enjoy being deluded. I think my life is fucking boring, and since I'm too scared to even make proper eye contact with a pretty girl, I distract myself with these stories. Some part of me, maybe the most real part of all, knows it's all bullshit. And so they're not even really delusions, they're more like immensely stressful and useless imagination games. Well, and it's a completely self-aggrandizing story, isn't it? I'm Odysseus, and this is my odyssey. The world conspires against me in my quest for truth, but not even sirens like Gabby or Nicole will detain me for long. I'm free to imagine that maybe they do want to seduce me, which plunges me into these strange translation games whereby any sentence might be a coded confession of desire. But regardless of the actual truth of what's going on in my brain, it's a huge obstacle to my clearer thinking. Just because it may be rooted in narcissism doesn't mean it's not a problem.

“How do you react then, when you believe you're part of a giant experiment?” Nicole asks. I'm a little disappointed that my story doesn't elicit from her *any* sort of outwardly visible personal judgment or feeling. This is as interesting as I'm capable of being, and I'm only this interesting for her. If anyone was going to find me fascinating, it would be Nicole, right now. But no, just the same neutral, professional, next-question-on-the-survey tone.

“I don't react. If I did, then that's when I would do the socially unacceptable things I'm afraid of doing. By reacting, I'd be letting the wrong part of me take control. Because I know, I mean I *know*, that's just crazy. I mean that's *crazy*! Right? So I don't react, and I'm able to very slowly rationalize my way back out of it. But whenever it happens, whenever a certain phrase or look or interaction falls the wrong way across my mind, I become very uncomfortable until I'm able to leave the setting. My ears and cheeks get really hot, and I can tell they're red, which makes them get more red, until I start to sweat. My ears ring, and my hands and feet

tingle like I might faint. And my teeth, the nerves in my teeth sting and burn, like they might explode out of my jaw if I were to unclench it. Sometimes, if it's bad enough, my whole face goes numb. And all of these physical sensations, some of which are outwardly manifest, only embarrass me more. Then, even when people talk directly to me, which is rare because my horrible body language and facial expression forbid interaction, like people can tell there's something really wrong, but when they do talk directly to me, I can barely respond, which is one more turn of the screw. After a bad one like that, the next few days are ruined for me, as I attempt to analyze my way back to solid ground.”

“Does that worry often prevent you from going places with your family?”

“No.”

“Does that worry often prevent you from going places with your friends or peers?”

“Yes.”

“How often does that worry prevent you from going places with your friends or peers? Almost all of the time, some of the time, or not very much of the time?”

“Almost all of the time.”

“Do you get upset with yourself for that worry?”

“Yes.”

“How upset with yourself do you get? Very upset, somewhat upset, or not very upset?”

“Very upset.” I pause. “I should probably talk about this with my regular psychologist, huh?”

“I would recommend it, yes.”

