Sprezzatura

By Isaac Escovedo

This is an essay about the essay I was trying to write. I have spent all day writing and it has been feeling like extruding sausage meat into pale pasty white pig bladder. I have been writing about my social anxiety, and the difficulty I have been having with making friends, and my fear of losing friendships when I graduate, and in some ways I wanted the essay to be about how the world is very big and I am a child stuck in a man's body and it is so scary to be alive and to know that other people are alive too.

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That essay was terrible. It was terrible because there was no specificity. I felt shit scared writing it and so I wrote thousands of words in the abstract. My essay had no stories and no characters except me and the faceless mass of people I was scared of. Worst of all, my essay was disgustingly self indulgent. It lay there naked and cried "Woe is Isaac! What a poor scared boy!" and I averted my eyes for its nakedness embarrassed me.

It was a pain in the ass to write too, because as I sat there on the library sky bridge gripping my keyboard and scowling at passers by, a man started a conversation behind me. This is an essay about the essay I was trying to write. This is an essay about a man I did not talk to.

I cannot describe the man's face to you because I never saw it, but I can tell you he had a head the shape of an upside down coke bottle. It was long and thin and his dirty blond hair fell in uneven thatches down to the nape of his neck.

"Excuse me," he said before he sat down. He said this to a girl sitting on the opposite side of the low table. She had a face like a peeled almond and light blond hair that fell to her shoulders. The man explained that he went to school in California, that he was in town on spring break visiting friends, and that his friends had just gotten jobs post-graduation so he had to find things to do in Bellingham until five pm each day. He asked if he could sit down and she said he could and so he sat and they talked about how Bellingham is a good place for hiking and mountain biking.

Listening in on other people's conversations is so fun. Overhearing snippets when you're walking by is nice because you can try to guess at the context, but nothing beats listening in on a good long chat. I wasn't *trying* to listen to their conversation in the library of course. I was frustratedly grinding out a masturbatory paragraph about how I'm good at flirting with people and bad at making friends, but despite my best efforts this strange man's words kept worming their way into my ears. I stopped writing and very sneakily took a peak over my shoulder. He was tall, with good posture. He had two ears and two shoulders. The shoulders lay flat, relaxed. I wondered if he ever had to pull them away from his ears the way I do. The girl who sat opposite him had a nose that was sketched with a drawing pencil and bright wide

eyes. She didn't look weirded out, or uncomfortable, or particularly enthusiastic. She was simply engaged, giving her full attention to a complete stranger.

They talked about the difference between his school's campus and Western (WWU is smaller and has more brick). He told her that he was majoring in kinesiology and about how the friends he's staying with work at a heavy equipment rental company, an industrial appliance delivery company, and a bakery. She told him she liked the rain, and that she took studying seriously.

This whole time I was seething ten feet away. This man was amazing at the very thing I was struggling to write about. He had walked up to a stranger (something I have not done since I approached Ruby in the dining hall two years ago), started an intriguing conversation where he both listened and spoke, and worst of all he seemed effortlessly confident.

I was writing about my social anxiety because it scared me, and my fear sucked the life from my words. I wrote bland, factual statement after bland factual statement like a robot visiting a therapist. My writing had no *me* in it, and without my personality there was nothing that differentiated it from the eight billion other tales of anxiety and fear of vulnerability that are currently in the process of being told.

Behind me the tall man talked and talked. He told his new friend about how he had to wake up at 5:30 for his job and how excited he was to sleep in until eleven today. He told her that his friends in California are party animals and his friends up here are nerds, so he'll go from doing keg stands to playing Dungeons and Dragons. He

talked about how he was hoping to drive up to a refinery that's somewhere near Bellingham because he heard it looks cool at night. He talked more than she did, but she didn't seem to mind and I could understand why. He spoke without condescension, or meanness, or even a hint of self centeredness. The guy was excited by life and happy to tell someone all about it.

Reality was conspiring against my essay. When I sat down to write about how lonely I was I realized that Josh was sitting across the table from me. We chatted and worked in companionable silence and I told him about how I hadn't really started my essay yet, and that I wasn't even nervous about it, which was a lie. Later I engaged in not one, but two conversations with acquaintances of mine. JD told me about his hectic baseball schedule and his roommates foray into black and white filmmaking. Riley informed me that a common friend of ours is living in Brazil while studying to join the FBI and did a killer Icelandic accent. I waved at three separate people and awkwardly nodded my head towards at least two others. I even had a conversation with my old neighbor Huthaifa at the circulation desk.

I have been having a mid-life crisis lately. I know it's a little early, but despite my age I am frequently in a state of existential depression. I feel like I have wasted my life, which is ridiculous because I am 21 and have not yet had the opportunity to live one. My depression has been so bad that lately I have decided it would be better for everyone involved if all of humanity marched into a machine that turned us into one big cube of meat in the middle of Central Park. I suspect that we as a species cause far

more pain, cruelty, and suffering to the overall biomass of the planet than we do joy, happiness, and pleasure.

But I have not killed myself yet, and I have not convinced anyone to join me in the meat cube contraption, so there must be something redeemable about life that outweighs all the murder, rape, genocide, animal cruelty, factory farming, snide comments, shit talking, awkward conversations, parking tickets, and electricity bills.

I have been searching for some trick, some little shift in my mindset that radically alters my social anxiety, my existential depression, and my fear of the future. I did not find it while writing my essay in the library, so at about five pm I turned off my laptop, packed my bag, and got up to go. The man and the woman were still talking behind me, and as I zipped my backpack shut the coke bottle head of chunky blond hair said,

'One of the things about me is that I always try to do what scares me. I'm really claustrophobic, so my friends and I go spelunking. I'm terrified of heights, so I've been climbing a lot of mountains. And I'm super scared of talking to people, so I've just been trying to have as many conversations with strangers as possible.'

I did not realize it at the time, but the solution to my social anxiety was ten feet behind my head. When I walked away I felt too hopeless and depressed and frustrated at this stranger to notice. We are not defined by our ideas. Our thoughts, no matter how noble and clever, do not make up who we are. We are defined by actions. I am the sum of all the things I have done and all the things I have been too scared to do. There

is no mindset shift that makes life effortless, there is a consistent commitment to doing the things that scare you. And I am so scared.

I am scared that when I graduate I will lose the beautiful tender saplings of friendship that I have grown in my past year at college. I am scared to go out into the world, to move to a new place and to know no one. I am scared of the future. I am scared of repeating the past. Most of all, I am scared that I will continue to allow my fear of other people, of love, of vulnerability, to rule my actions.

The answers we seek are rarely sexy, or easy, or fair. Life is cold and cruel and full of suffering. There are 600 million cats on the planet, so statistically at least one of them is being kicked to death at this very moment. I have spent a lot of time thinking about that cat, and feeling sorry for it, and bemoaning a world that allows such a wonderful creature to be harmed. But I have ignored my partner's cat, who is asleep on the chair to my right as I write. She is beautiful and content and if I stop writing and get up to pet her she will look at me and purr. Life is not good or bad, it just is.

So we do the hard things, because it is better to face our fears than to be ruled by them. One day I will be brave enough to approach a stranger in a public place and engage them in conversation for over an hour through sheer charisma; and perhaps some dipshit sitting ten feet away desperately trying to be the next Hemingway will overhear our conversation and realize that he is worthy of love and friendship just the way he is. There is no trick to life besides living it with others. You will be burned. You will have your heart broken. You will feel like you have made irredeemable mistakes.

But there will be golden moments where you sit in a circle with people you love and your heart will feel full. No amount of suffering can outweigh those moments. We are built to survive. We are built to love.