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ENGL 347

12/09/21

It's a Wonderful Commute or: Portrait of the Comedian as an Old Man

*Oh, you could study Shakespeare and be quite elite,  
And you could charm the critics and have nothing to eat,  
Just slip on a banana peel, the world's at your feet,  
Make 'em laugh, make 'em laugh, make 'em laugh!*

-Cosmo Brown, *Singin' in the Rain*

*St. Laurent.* It's nighttime in the big city and I'm taking the Green Line to a gig, well, I say 'gig' but it's really an open mic. Though the older comics will always try to make you feel like it's more special than it is so they don't have to face the reality that they're 45 and still fighting teenagers for stage time in an empty room in an empty strip-mall. I'll gladly give them my spot. I'm in no particular hurry to get up there and do my outdated, quasi-racist Cardi B impression for the umpteenth time. And yet I feel absolutely no desire to write any new material either. Who'd I be doing it for anyway, the audience? I could give a shit about what some open-mic audience thinks of me (because consider what exactly constitutes the open-mic audience. It's usually a 60-40 mix of supportive parents and a few tourists from Halifax who were tricked into thinking they would be seeing some actual comedians. So a laugh from them can never be taken at face value. There's always this lingering feeling that what you just did was lazy, hacky, or pandering. Especially when all of them laugh at the same time, unanimously. That's a genuine cause for concern. Because at least when you bomb with these people, there's something punk-rock about it. You can tell yourself that they just weren't hip enough for your subversive subgenre of penis jokes, that you went out on your terms, and that your set was actually designed

as an intentional fuck-you to this yuppie crowd). So if I'm not doing it for them or their validation, then who am I doing it for, me? Sure, doing this may have been a dream of mine a long time ago, but that was, well, a long time ago.

*McGill.* So why continue at all? Out of habit, I suppose. And it's not like I have anything better to do. But then again, I really could get used to not going to bed at 2 a.m. on a Tuesday. But for tonight at least, habit wins out again. Once more I'll get off at Atwater, walk past the homeless Indigenous women shouting at each other and pretend I either care or don't care depending on my mood that day and on how loud they're shouting, and then it's off to the sad, empty strip-mall atop which the comedy club ironically sits. Each time it gets harder and harder to resist the urge to break with routine and blow right past Atwater to see how far Green Line will take me.

*Peel.* I could also just get off here and go grab a stiff, overpriced drink in some gentrified downtown bar. Or in the dank Irish pub nearby that once hosted its own open-mic nights in the basement (there was no audience so to speak, but the back of the room was always filled with broke comics nursing their one beer as they talked loudly over whoever was on stage trying to mumble their act through the shitty sound system, waiting only for their own time to shine. Needless to say that these "shows" were not good for business and quickly discontinued). I remember how I'd sneak into work—at the time a warehouse that was conveniently close by—after hours and tirelessly rehearse my material before the show. I'd have it all memorized right down to the last, not-so-subtle smirk. Oh, to be young and still give a damn.

Back then, I still thought I knew what I wanted and how I'd get it. I thought I knew exactly what kind of comic I'd be once I'd gathered up the courage to perform. Back when all these schemes were still purely in the realm of the hypothetical and my faith in my abilities was

the highest it would ever be, I thought I'd be able to go up each night and just riff out an entirely new set, or do impressions of anybody at the drop of a hat, and be an incredibly physical comedian. But then when I did go up, I found myself refusing to do any of that. It didn't feel right. I felt like some dancing monkey the second I even tried. Comedy is, mainly, about subverting expectations. So, following that logic, the funniest thing I could ever do is go up in front of an audience expecting me to be funny and not be funny. See what I mean? Why even bother trying?

But then again, is the 'Not Funny One' really the kind of comedian I want to be known as? I don't even know what I would want to be known as. I have yet to find that sweet spot of material that can please an audience without also making me feel like some scumbag sellout. I still haven't found my voice, and I don't want to end up like those older comics that are still searching for it, still hanging on to the dream long after that train has passed them by. The thought of being like them—some middle-aged hack still doing those same terrible open-mic spots, trying to refine that same terrible bit on how White guys jerk off vs. how Black guys jerk off, and still insisting that his one TV credit from the 90's be mentioned every time he goes up: "Your next *headliner* can be seen on the Daily show!", even though it was a crafts service position back when Craig Kilborn was still hosting—scares me beyond belief. I just can't bear the idea of losing that bad.

*Concordia.* So what if tonight's performance were my last? What if after tonight I just walked away from comedy forever? It's tempting. I never really gave much thought to life beyond comedy, a life where I stay in school and finally pick a major (my parents have been pushing for a career as a mathematician—even though I'm pretty sure there's no new math waiting to be discovered—ever since I received that isosceles-triangle-shaped trophy shaped in

high school). My eyes drift towards an old man sitting across from me and rifling intently through a musty old shopping bag. I don't recognize him yet he also somehow strikes me as incredibly familiar. Who could it be that he reminds me of, a celebrity? Couldn't be. The only celebrity I know that's old enough to fit the bill is Betty White. But this man is much too tall.

*Atwater.* I keep staring. I don't notice that I've missed my stop. I don't care. It's bugging me too much now (but at this point, any excuse not to get off here would've been a good one. Hell, I'd have even stayed on just to keep listening to the Hare Krishna guys' chanting). The more I look at him the more I begin to see a resemblance, to see that he sort of looks like me. Well, like I imagine I would look as an old man. I'd recognize that weird forehead vein and those cavernous nostrils anywhere. It's uncanny. I'm sitting here thinking wouldn't it be funny if I was sitting across from my future self? The version of me that picked a "normal" future, outside of comedy, that played it safe.

*Lionel-Groulx.* I know this couldn't possibly be the case. But then again, if there is even the slightest chance that it is, then it merits at least some semi-serious consideration. What if this old man really was sent to me from the future, as a warning of sorts? As an incarnation of one of my many different potentialities arriving just as I find myself standing at another one of life's crossroads. Could this be my very own Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come visiting me? And if so, am I really just going to continue sitting across from him awkwardly pretending to look at my phone? I've never been one for confrontation (just ask all the club owners who got away with paying me in "exposure" rather than actual cash), nor am I very proactive. I've become very good at allowing my shyness and chronic overthinking to dissuade me from doing most things I want or feel I should do ("No need to ask her out, let yourself feel the first glimmer of joy in years when she says yes, go out, have a great time, fall in love, and have a successful long-term

relationship together. She's only going to break your heart in the end anyhow!"). For once, I feel I shouldn't let these things control my life. I would only regret it if I did.

But that being said, I still have some reservations, like any reasonable person, about diving head-first into a conversation with my future self. Is it even allowed? Every time-travel movie has its own rules on different 'you's' interacting with one another other. Some say that it isn't a problem at all and would in fact make for a great buddy comedy. Others say that even the slightest crossing of one's own timestream could shatter the flow of space-time as we know it. I wouldn't know either way. I'm a simple man who doesn't go for all that sci-fi stuff (I'll take a good old Tyler Perry movie over *Spiderman 13: A Tale of Two Spideymans* or whatever anytime). But even I've seen *Back to the Future*, and I do have the distinct recollection of Marty McFly having to duck behind a bush to avoid having to have sex with his mother at some point. So, perhaps it is best to err on the side of caution here.

*Charlevoix*. But I have so many questions for this potential future Me. Beyond questions about the future in general such as 'Are we ever able to reverse democracy's seemingly inevitable decline?', 'Do we manage to set aside all tribalism and unite as one global collective to solve the climate crisis?', or 'Do we ever find a new host for *Jeopardy*?', I'm curious to know how we're doing. Are we happy? Do we ever miss comedy? And if we don't, is it because we've learned to enjoy the present moment as an end unto itself, or have we simply traded in one obsession for another (please tell me we never become a musical theater nerd. Anything but that. I'll take model train enthusiast over that)? Does life become less of a burden without this quixotic ambition constantly weighing us down? Or has the lack of something to strive toward rendered us rudderless? Do we look back on our life and ultimately think that we made the right decisions? And if we didn't, are we ever able to acknowledge it? Or do we still think we're

always right about everything? Do we ever stop making the same mistakes? Do we ever graduate from this school of hard knocks? Do girls finally find us funny? Or do they still just say “you’re weird” instead of actually laughing. I see no wedding ring on our finger, so that probably answers that question.

*Lasalle.* Perhaps in the future this doesn’t even matter. Perhaps in the future the concept of matrimony becomes obsolete once artificial intelligence becomes advanced enough to learn how to breed human life and remind itself to take the trash out to the curb in our stead (presumably to leave us humans more time to go pick strawberries in the metaverse or whatever it is that will pass for leisure in the future). But I know me. And I know that monogamy is alive and well and that it just is we who are still too afraid of sharing our life with someone, because we are still ever so greedy with our time and no one is ever good enough to for us to want to commit even a second of it to them. And I know our 150-year-old parents (their consciences by now digitally extended and preserved as NFT’s), will still be wondering if we’re gay (not that there’s anything wrong with that, they’ll say), and giving each other that knowing, albeit now virtual, side-eye each time we assure them that we really do enjoy living alone, that we are single by choice, that it allows us to fully devote ourselves to our more meaningful pursuits (again, really hoping it’s nothing worse than model trains).

*De l’Église.* The novelty of this “visitation” is beginning to wear thin and gives way to resentment. My hypothetical questions grow more confrontational. Why are you still riding the subway? Can you not afford a car? And why are you reading from a supermarket flyer? I mean actually reading it, like it was Dostoevsky or something. Was the Idiot Store out of colouring books? God, what are you doing with my life? I look at his stupid cargo pants that unzip at the calf and am angered at the indecisive fool we’ve become, or rather haven’t learned to outgrow.

We can't bear the thought of closing a door on anything, and so, in some vain attempt to be all things to all people we condemn ourselves to wear these silly pants we don't even like that make us look like we're going fly fishing even though the shopping bags filled with old soda cans (don't you remember our dentist saying soda was bad for us?) tell quite a different story, a story about a sorry old man unable to commit to any path in life and forced into a vicious cycle of food stamps and lottery scratchers just to make ends meet. But judging from the Harrison Ford feather-earring that you wear on just one ear, you probably don't think that matters much, do you. You probably have this whole treatise on our sick culture of materialism and "living within your means" rehearsed just like Dad used to. A mathematician, this guy most certainly ain't.

*Verdun.* But the earring, the cargo shorts, the smell of cabbage—all of these things are immaterial really. They are not the real source of my anger. What angers me is not the fact that I'm wearing all this crap or still riding the subway, but that I am doing all of this *here*, that I am still *here*. How could I still be *here* after all this time? I should've been long gone by now. Off somewhere making my own luck, whether it be as a comedian or not, rather than being a slave to circumstance and staying right where I was put. This old man sitting across from me is not a warning. He is not here to tell me to change my ways before it's too late, or to embrace my dreams and pursue them with the reckless abandon and pure, childlike passion I once had. It's already too late. This is the future I was always heading towards. There are no such things as crossroads. This idea that both branches of the forked road can lead you to where you need to go is nonsensical. You either take the right path or you get lost trying. There are no infinite potentialities, or multiple 'you's' to blame here. There is only what you see in the mirror.

That is why it was so immediately obvious that he was Me and no one else. I could draw a direct, perfect line from the man I am now to the man I will become. There is not a single

scratch on older Me's face that could've planted even the seed of a doubt that he wasn't Me. There are no surprises here. Not a single one. His face isn't even that weathered for a man so old. It was obvious that he kept out of the sun and moisturized often. I can't believe that after all this time I'd still be so prudent and afraid of taking any risks. I did everything I could to try to break away from this cowardly mould, to try to be the man I needed to be rather than the one that was holding me back. I tried clubbing, I—well that's pretty much as far as my walk on the wild side went, but still. And, judging by the nervous old man sitting across from me, I guess all that effort was for nothing. Nature is nature and we are all powerless over it.

*Jolicoeur.* So why fight it then? It was obvious that Future Me hadn't put up much of a fight either, merely being content with waking up each day still remembering how to tie his own shoes, content with being the biggest fish in a very small pond. I get that we should try to pursue a life free from this toxic relationship with comedy, but does that mean that we can never want anything else instead? At which point did we give up on the notion of ever trying to achieve anything at all, that our efforts were worthy of some sort of payoff? Did it just happen, like a switch being flipped? Or was it over a long period of attrition, after years of waking up to that blank canvas hoping to one day see your next masterpiece magically painted on it.

This old man does not represent some alternative future where I find contentment outside of comedy. This man had tried just as I am trying now and failed miserably. But the seed of this failure had been planted long ago. Because, for all my talk of lofty ambition, courage, and risk-taking, I know that I am at heart a creature of habit. I like when things fit into neat patterns. And I've always craved structure, even though I know structure for structure's sake is a dangerous thing to pursue because you're liable to take it wherever you can get it. We tire easily and



eventually grow so tired of always being so tired that the respite offered by taking the path of least resistance becomes, ironically, the hardest of all things to resist. It's only natural.

And just like Future Me at some point gave up on raging against the machine, I no longer have the energy to rage against myself. I am too easy a target for my discontent. It is always easier to tear something down than to propose a better way of building it back up, and an easy way of feeling like you're solving a problem. Self-flagellation is always a more convenient outlet for one's righteous indignation than any actually constructive endeavour. I am a distraction to myself so long as I am at odds with myself. So perhaps it is time for me to lay down my arms and make peace with destiny. I must realize that it is not the old man who is to be blamed for my anger. It is the man who knows about the old man and yet does nothing to avoid becoming him, he who does go gently into that good night.

I keep looking for reasons not to take chances, hints of external forces plotting my downfall behind the scenes. Be it social predestination, God, or astrology, there is always someone to blame. Because to any person beginning in life, such unprecedented control over one's choices can be daunting and we tend to look for any excuse to relinquish it. But even when your parents tell you to stay in school and do your homework, or some older comic tells you not to curse so much in your act, or a future version of yourself travels back in time just to call you an asshole, you don't actually have to listen to any of it. They're all just words, i.e., not binding. Words are empty series of sounds emitted by the vibrations of one's vocal cords that we choose to associate with different meanings. These meanings are highly variable and can change based on who is emitting these sounds and where in the world they are emitting from. All this to say that most of the time, a rose is just a rose, and the old man sitting across from you is just that.

*Monk.* I look into Future Me's wizened face and see a warmth that I had until then failed to pick up on. I realize that I've perhaps been a tad unfair to him. After all, my expectations of him and of myself have indeed been insurmountably high. You couldn't fault any man for falling short of such impossible ideals. I must take comfort in wherever we do end up going rather than where we should've. So he may not be the successful comedian that I've dreamt of being since before I even knew what a comedian was, but he looks contented, truly contented. The look not of a man who settled for less, but of one who got his money's worth out of life. And there's value in that. I need to stop hating myself because I am all that I have to work with. And I need to stop trying to make the facts fit my theories and allow my theories to be shaped by experience.

Perhaps we're not destined to start an artistic revolution, but instead to do just well enough to be able to afford a modest home near the family that raised us and the friends we've known all our lives, and perhaps even to have children and grandchildren who look like us and make us feel more immortal than any penis joke ever could. Only when compared to the unrealistic aspirations of a child (like, say, wanting to be an astronaut or a pirate) does this not seem like an enviable fate. I always worried that I'd never be original enough, but a life like that, ordinary as it may seem, cannot be imitated. Perhaps it is he who sticks so stubbornly to his plans and routines that is the real coward. It takes courage to be able stop and know when to walk away, to acknowledge that when something isn't working out like you planned, that you were wrong, and to trust life enough to let it take you where it was always going to.

And so I say, so what if we still take the subway? It could always be worse. We could have been a subway masturbator. One must never underestimate the value of small victories. The path that leads one to becoming a subway commuter or a subway masturbator is virtually the same. Both require that you first step onto the train. Whether you then quietly sit down and scroll

through your phone or whip your dick out is entirely up to you. But you need to take that first step to find out. No amount of hypothetical speculation can replace that.

*Angrignon.* End of the line. The train begins to slow down. The old man moistens his lips as he begins to gather his things to get off. I look at him one more time trying to meet his gaze. He doesn't say anything but he doesn't have to. He knows his job is done. I know this was all in my head, but I could swear that he even winks at me as he gets up. I'm glad to see that my future is in such good hands and I look forward to seeing whatever art we choose make out of this life. The train stops and the doors open. Apparently in the future I become one of those old men who always runs out of the subway like a madman to catch a bus that's running twenty minutes late anyway (like missing it would irreversibly disrupt his carefully-laid plans to watch *Antiques Roadshow* all afternoon), because Future Me bolts out of his seat like it's on fire and shoves rudely past everyone, even a pregnant woman. And just like that, it's over. Any admiration I may have had for my future self evaporates the second he clumsily runs out those doors, shopping bags swinging wildly about, in a hurry to get to nowhere. I shrug and think to myself that that couldn't possibly be me. I am far too lazy to chase after anything.