

THE PINECONE

“Does everybody have their object from nature? Have you become acquainted?” The instructor, with one hand protecting his eyes from the sun, takes in the green field speckled with his first-ever group of students.

Maggie studies the pinecone in her hand and then glances around to her fellow “Introduction to Acting” students. A broad-shouldered blonde boy sporting a Lady Gaga t-shirt hunches over a stick cradled tenderly in his arms. A girl glares at a large orange leaf she holds pinched between two fingers like a cigarette. She juts one hip to the side with attitude.

Maggie learned no names but that of their instructor – Anthony. Fresh out of grad school, he assured the class that they’d all get through their first semester together. Then he sent them outside to talk to sticks and rocks.

The class reconvenes with their found objects and sits in a large circle.

“Great, who would like to start?” The instructor, Anthony, gazes around the circle. The sun shines off his smooth head, shaved bald to disguise his prematurely receding hairline. The Lady Gaga fan boy hesitantly waves. Anthony smiles, eyes bright, and nods.

“Um, well, his name is Treeman, and he’s lost his family?” Fan boy extends his hands to reveal the stick named Treeman. “He’s pretty helpless right now? And, I think, he needs me to take care of him? Like maybe I could help him find his family or kind of, like, keep him safe? Maybe I could keep him from breaking?”

“Good! Good, that’s very good, Brian.” Anthony smiles at Brian, then turns to the rest of the circle. “Does everyone see how engaged Brian is with his object? He gave his object a name and a backstory and related it to himself. But you know what really impresses me?” Anthony turns back to Brian. “You gave yourself an objective. You created a reason *why* you’re engaging with Treeman.” Brian smiles shyly, his cheeks reddening slightly.

“Who’s next?”

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The girl with the orange leaf raises her hand. As she speaks, she examines the tips of her long, reddish-blond hair.

“Okay, so I don’t know the leaf’s name because we didn’t get along very well. She was all crabby and didn’t want to talk because she’d just fallen off her tree. I sense a lot of, like, displaced anger. She shouldn’t be mad at me because it’s not like I picked her off the tree.”

“Okay, cool!” Anthony rubs his hands together like he’s about to devour something, getting ready to “dig in.”

“Amber, right?” The girl is lying on her side, propped up on her elbow. The leaf sits on the grass in front of her. She nods without looking up from her hair.

“Can anyone identify the difference between Brian’s relationship and Amber’s relationship?” Anthony’s eyes widen – he’s approaching another *teaching moment*.

“Amber created a conflict with her object. She created an obstacle that needs to be overcome. Thanks, Amber, for really challenging yourself in this exercise.”

Maggie keeps her eyes trained down at her pinecone as other students describe their conversations with inanimate objects. She doesn’t understand this exercise. *Hey there, pinecone*, she thinks, *what’s your story?* The pinecone does nothing but make Maggie’s hands sticky. *What’s our objective, pinecone? Why am I talking to you?*

Her classmates cradle rocks and blades of grass and Anthony uses words like tactic, obstacles, objectives and Maggie feels the strange sensation of realizing everyone else is speaking a foreign language. Maggie is the last student to speak. She looks at her fellow students. They all suddenly seem separate from Maggie – on the “other side” of something. They look at her, waiting expectantly.

“Okay... so...this is a pinecone,” Maggie presents with a little mustered-up fake enthusiasm. “Um, that’s all I got. There’s kind of a language barrier.”

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Anthony nods. “Interesting, tell us more about that.”

“Right, well, um, the pinecone doesn’t speak, so – “

“It doesn’t speak or you’re not listening?” Anthony grins as if he finds all of this very profound. “We’re all done here for today, but Maggie? I’d like you to keep working on this exercise.”

Brian drops Treeman and picks up his backpack, pulling the straps over his hunched shoulders. Amber’s orange leaf scatters, absent-mindedly ripped to shreds during class. Maggie carefully zips the pinecone into its own personal side pocket.

Pinecone. AKA conifer. Structure - cone-shaped, hence the name. Texture - coarse. Layered plates resembling scales open to catch pollen, close to fertilize and re-open at full maturity. This particular pinecone = fully mature and female, according to the Internet. Also, definitely a pinecone, not spruce, fir, cedar, or larch.

Maggie reviews her notes before packing them in her bag, ready for Introduction to Acting day two. She’d kept the pinecone on the corner of her desk since the last class, where it sat quietly mocking her for the past week. Her research did not arouse any insight into last week’s exercise, but the attempt comforts her. She now tucks the pinecone into her bag’s side pocket, leaving behind a small circle of sticky residue in its place.

“Everybody find their own space on the floor.” Today the class would stay inside the theater, which brought some relief to Maggie. She spots some empty square footage and sits. Brian sits next to her. He’s wearing his Lady Gaga t-shirt again, this time underneath an unbuttoned dress shirt paired with gym shorts.

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“Lay on your back and stretch out your arms and legs. Close your eyes and inhale: one, two, three.” Anthony instructs in his best hypnotist voice as he saunters in between his sprawled students. “Exhale: one, two, three... Inhale, and focus on keeping those breaths nice and even.”

With each exhale, Maggie could sense her peers relaxing, practically melting into the floor.

“Release that tension in your face, Maggie,” Anthony’s voice breathily murmurs from behind and Maggie winces from surprise. “As soon as you’ve allowed all of your muscles to relax, slowly roll onto your side. No need to rush! Only move once you’re completely relaxed.” Maggie can hear the rest of the class shift positions. She silently commands her rigid muscles to loosen, but they continue to twinge.

“Once you’ve reached your side, pull your knees to your chest. I want you to imagine you’re inside an egg that’s yet to hatch. Inside your egg you’re safe, you’re comfortable, and you have no awareness of the world outside.”

Although not entirely relaxed, Maggie decides to catch up to her classmates and roll to her side. Maggie concentrates on being inside an egg. Instead, she feels like the egg itself, as if her muscles are attempting to escape her body and she’s holding them captive. Thinking of eggs reminds her of Anthony’s shiny bald head. She remembers that pinecones fertilize seeds inside their plates, which sort of makes them tree eggs. Perhaps she isn’t coiled inside a fragile white shell, but trapped inside the rough scales of a pinecone.

“You’re all growing. Slowly, your egg will become too small and confining.” The students begin to slowly writhe and press against their invisible shells. Next to Maggie, Brian pecks at the air. Amber mimes a break through her shell with a sharp jab of a claw.

“Yes, Amber, good! As each of you gain strength, you’ll eventually break out of your shell and spread your wings. Don’t rush! Feel free to hatch on your own time.”

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Wings? Did everybody else know we were birds? Maggie wonders. Judging by the chorus of feeble chirps and nibbling beaks, it appears so. Shoulders roll, necks stretch, and elbows jut in awkward positions to mimic feathered appendages stretching for the first time.

“Take in this entirely new world around you. What are your first reactions, your first instincts?” Anthony projects, now standing near the back of the theater.

Brian hops lightly toward Maggie, slightly crouched with collapsed posture in an attempt to diminish his broad torso. He resembles a Marabou stork that wishes he were a linnet bird. He gives a tentative peck to Maggie’s invisible shell – a kind offering of guidance. She follows his lead and bobs her head at the imaginary cracks until she breaks free. Together, Brian and Maggie stretch and flap imaginary wings and peck at the ground for worms. Other birds have created makeshift families and begin building nests with stray chairs, music stands, and tumbling mats. A couple misanthropes sing as they wander off the stage and into the house.

Amber, who has taken the shape of something large and predatory, charges toward a small family with her wingspan open wide and snatches a music stand from their nest. She glares and screeches aggressively and stakes claim on center stage. She swipes a couple chairs and a foam mat to build a sizeable lair and soon other predators join her. A social hierarchy forms in the matter of minutes as the predators subdue their prey. Brian, seemingly spurred by an instinctive compulsion for justice, joins the cause to inspire an uprising among the victims. He unites the small, weak, and timid to defend their territory and take back their nests. With a howl and a stretch of his massive wingspan, Brian dives toward the predators, who jump out of his way. He snags the stolen foam mat and carries it back to prey territory – a Robin Hood for the faux-bird world.

Among all of this, Maggie wonders why they chose to personify small, fragile birds in the first place. In reality, didn’t they each have the same option as Amber to embody a dangerous and

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aggressive animal? Amber's power, Maggie realizes, depends not on her individual strength but on her submissive classmates. Maggie makes a break for the predator's nest.

Thwack!

"This is a prime example of the importance of these exercises." Anthony raises an ice pack to Maggie's eye. "As actors you *must* have a keen awareness of your scene partners." In her moment of impulsivity, Maggie hadn't noticed Amber with her arms outstretched, turning just in time to clip Maggie's face with the back of her hand. The strike served as a sort of wake-up call for Maggie, unsure how she evolved from reluctantly pretending to hatch from an egg to defending a scorned bird colony.

Anthony runs a hand over his smooth scalp and grimaces. "That's enough for today, folks. See you next week." Feeling defeated once again, Maggie gathers her things and moves toward the door.

"Oh, Maggie? Could you hang back for a moment?" Anthony's eyebrows furrow for just a moment as he glances at his notes. "I think you'll find this class more rewarding if you can drop this resistance toward the exercises."

"Oh, um..." Maggie struggles to respond. "I don't mean to be... difficult. I think, maybe, I'm not getting it. I don't think I understand."

Anthony sighs. "I only ask you keep an open mind this semester. Maybe give our first exercise another try, see if anything changes for you." He slings his bag over a shoulder and walks toward the exit. "Oh, and keep me posted on your eye. Take it easy."

Social structure of birds: dominance hierarchy ("pecking order")

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Social roles = leaders, protectors, aggressors, followers

Higher rank birds = size/strength advantage, physical posturing, intimidation by staring or behaving aggressively.

Lower rank birds = sick or injured, smaller sized, newest to the environment.

Maggie packs a bag with a towel, water bottle, a couple granola bars, a jacket, and the pinecone. She double knots her sneakers and slides on a pair of sunglasses. Today, her mind is completely open. She hikes out to a shady wooded area just outside campus, spreads the towel over a flat patch of grass and sits cross-legged on top of it. She sets the pinecone directly in front of her. She holds it in her lap. She lies down and balances it on her forehead. She carefully counts its scales. She counts the remaining weeks of class left in the semester, also known as the amount of opportunities left for her to make a fool of herself. As the day begins to wind down and the temperature drops, Maggie packs up her stuff and walks home feeling a little chilly but otherwise exactly the same.

“Long hair.”

“Long hair.”

“Long hair.”

“...Long hair.”

“Lung air.”

“Long hair.”

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“Stop. Maggie, listen carefully and repeat exactly what you hear from your partner. If they don’t phonate a letter, don’t add it back in. If they accidentally stutter, imitate them.” Maggie nods, wondering if Anthony actually thinks that, after an hour of this exercise, she might still be confused.

“Okay, Amber, you can take a seat.” Tossing her long hair over one shoulder, Amber steps down from the stage and slouches into her audience seat. “Maggie, I’d like you to try again. Brian, you’re up!”

The stage is bare except for two chairs set facing each other on center stage. Maggie occupies one and Brian slides into the other.

“Same deal, Brian. Begin facing away from Maggie and when I say, ‘Go,’ turn around and speak your first observation of your partner. Maggie, listen carefully and repeat only what you hear. Okay, go!”

“Black eye?”

The class stifles laughter and Brian’s shoulders stiffen. Maggie suppresses the urge to hide her bruise with her hand.

“Black eye.”

“Black eye.”

“Black eye.”

“...Brown eyes?” Brian relaxes his shoulders and smiles shyly at Maggie, pleased with his phrase modification.

“Brow – brown eyes.”

“Brown eyes.”

“Brown eyes.”

“Brown eyes.”

“Brown eyes.”

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“Big, brown eyes.”

“Big, um...” Maggie blushes.

“Maggie, repeat exactly what you hear from your partner. This is the same close listening we’ve been discussing since our first class, do you remember? Don’t think, just repeat.”

Pinecone. *Pie-nub-cob-nub*, the N sticks to her tongue like sap on bark. She repeats the word like a mantra, muttering under her breath as she walks to class, while she does her laundry, as she pours her chocolate milk in the dining hall. *Pine-cone-pine-cone-pine-cone-pine-cone* repeats again and again until the word becomes utter nonsense to her. The semester drags on, each week delivering a fresh avalanche of vague instructions and abstract ideas on to Maggie’s mental doorstep. Her peers smile and nod, *yes, of course, I get it*, and Maggie stays quiet in her attempt to blend in. *If I could just get past this pinecone thing*, Maggie secretly thought. Somehow, that would be the key to enter this secret world Maggie observed from the outside once a week.

By the week of finals, the class has moved on to portraying and addressing humans – a concept Maggie felt pretty comfortable with before Anthony’s quiet sighs and grimaces suggest to her that she might be doing it wrong, as if human-ness suits her even less than birds or pinecones. Small talk and pleasantries Maggie used to exchange easily become complicated as she develops a habit of second-guessing and parsing for meaning. *How am I doing? Fine? Good to see you?* She thinks, suddenly unsure of what it means to be fine or glad to see someone but equally apprehensive of abandoning the habitual responses.

“I think you might be thinking too much?” Brian responds when Maggie tosses her script in the air, frustrated. For their final performance, Anthony has chosen a scene in which Maggie laments the death of her lover, killed by her husband - Brian. It’s overblown melodrama, complete

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with excessive exclamations and hyperbole – or perhaps Maggie is missing something. Maybe, hidden underneath cheesy dialogue lays a theatrical masterpiece that Maggie doesn't get. "I really want to see you dig in to these high stakes, Maggie," Anthony had said as he held eye contact just long enough to make Maggie slightly uncomfortable.

When it came time to choose scene partners, Maggie's classmates avoided her eyes and scrambled into pairs. Nobody wanted to risk their own final grade. Finally, Brian met her eyes with a pitying look followed by a forced smile. Even Brian, the one friend Maggie managed to make this semester, hesitated to sabotage himself for the sake of Maggie's feelings. Now it seemed Brian had made the wrong choice as Maggie's brain flooded with thoughts - *What is my next line again? Am I being too casual, over the top, I don't know, I've never talked to a killer before. Should I be angrier, scared, more desperate, is my face doing something funny? How would Anthony react? What is he expecting? What did Brian's character just say?*

"Let's just... take a little break?" Brian says. He sits at Maggie's desk. Maggie retrieves her script and scribbles notes. Brian notices the pinecone and reaches to touch it.

"Careful with that!" Maggie snaps, and Brian jerks his hands away, giving her a look as if she's lost her mind. "It's nothing, it's just... fragile." Brian sits quietly, then slowly picks up the pinecone. He cradles it in his wide palms and Maggie remembers Brian on that first day of class, crouching over that small stick named Treeman. She reminds Brian of that day.

"You've kept this since the first class? Why do you still have it?"

"I think I still need it." Maggie retells the day they pretended to be birds and Anthony's suggestion. She describes her trips to the woods and her mantra. She confesses her built up self-doubt and frustrations and begs Brian to please, please just tell her what to do about the pinecone so she can move on with her life. Brian looks at Maggie for a moment, perplexed, then down at the pinecone lying in his hands. With no warning, he crumples it in his fist.

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“Okay Brian, Maggie, you’re our last scene!” Anthony says as Amber and her partner clear their acting blocks. Brian glances nervously at Maggie as they set up. Maggie looks as if she hasn’t slept well. Her usually neatly combed hair is unwashed and disheveled and her eyes look vaguely hollow. Brian nods in a way that asks Maggie if she’s ready to begin and she nods back. She sits and Brian walks offstage to get ready for his entrance.

“I’m not proud of what I’ve done.”

Brian begins, and when Maggie turns to respond, she remembers Brian with the crushed pinecone in his meaty palm. The scales, brittle with age, had crumbled into flakes that fell through his fingers on to Maggie’s carpet.

“Done! What have you done?”

Brian tossed the pathetic core into the trash and brushed his hands against each other, sending crumbs and dust into the air.

“Please, darling, I beg you to understand, I had to – “

Brian shrugged as Maggie stared, mouth open. “Did you seriously just do that?”

“– No, no! You’re lying, it can’t be true!”

“I had no other choice! You gave me no other choice!”

He destroyed it so casually, as if it was nothing. It meant nothing to him, even after Maggie had confided all of her hours and days of studying, obsessing, searching for some sort of meaning.

“How could you do this to me! Do I mean nothing to you?”

Maggie had snatched the trashcan and dug out the corpse. She picked salvageable scale pieces out of the carpet fibers with shaky fingers.

“You’re my wife! You mean everything to me! How could I watch you with that other man?”

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“Okay, as your friend, I think I need to tell you you’re being completely crazy,” Brian had said, grabbing her wrists.

“Don’t touch me!”

Maggie had twisted out of his grip and stomped away pouting, her back turned on Brian.

“I did this for us! So we could return to our lives – ”

“We can’t ever go back! Don’t you see? His blood is on your hands!”

Brian had wiped his hands, sticky with pollen, against his pant legs. Maggie, still fuming, turned to glare at Brian with crossed arms and pursed lips.

“Please! In time, you’ll see I did what’s best – “

Brian tried to suppress his grin. “So, I know you’re super pissed right now? But if you could, like, just take a step back from this whole situation for a second? You have to admit, it’s pretty funny.”

“ - Get out!”

Brian steps back onstage with his broad shoulders hunched in his signature posture and a shy smile on his face. He pats Maggie on the back and they return to their seats with the rest of the class.

“Hey, Maggie,” Amber whispers, looking up from the tips of her long, reddish-blond hair.

“That was, like, really good.”

“That was a great round of scenes, everybody!” Anthony jumps onstage. “Really solid! What a satisfying way to end a semester.” Anthony sits cross-legged at the end of the stage and peers out over his class. “I want you all to know that I’m incredibly impressed and proud of the improvement every one of you has made over these past few months. I’m glad I’ve gotten the opportunity to get to know you as actors and as people. Teaching you has been a rewarding experience, and a learning one for me as well. I hope this class has been valuable to each of you, as well.” Anthony looks down for a moment and runs a hand over that shiny head. “Unfortunately, I

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won't be returning after the winter break. It's, uh, saddening, for me, that I won't be here to watch you continue to grow, but I hope you all continue to learn and perform. If you ever have any questions, you all have my e-mail – I'd love to hear from you.”

Anthony stands and brushes himself off. Through a thin smile he adds, “Well, that's it from me. I'll be e-mailing final scene grades this afternoon. Have a great break.”

Back in Maggie's room, she sits at the makeshift workspace she's developed at her desk and plugs in her hot glue gun. The mangled pinecone and its appendages lay spread out on a newspaper. Maggie gingerly touches a reattached pinecone scale – the glue is dry and sturdy. For the remainder of the afternoon, she focuses intently on this strange surgery, applying small dabs of hot glue with a steady hand. She works in this hyper-focused state until the *ping* of new e-mail breaks her trance.

Final Scene Grade: Maggie, good improvement, can tell you're connected to scene, work on grounding voice.

B.

At the end of finals week, Maggie packs for her flight home. She brings two carry-ons to the airport: one small suitcase and one small drawstring bag she crafted from scrap fabric and carried around her neck to shelter the repaired - but vulnerable - pinecone. She isn't sure why she couldn't leave it on her desk in her room. It would have been safer there, but leaving it behind didn't feel right. Barefoot in the security line, she waits until just before she reaches the scanner to remove the pinecone bag and immediately replaces it when she is cleared.

With hours until her flight, Maggie wanders around the terminal. She buys a cup of coffee in the restaurant and sits in a corner by the window. She pulls the bag over her head and withdraws

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the reconstructed pinecone, setting it on the small table next to her. She thinks of Brian, who had driven her to the airport that morning.

“Can you imagine next semester? With no more acting class and no more Anthony?” Brian had asked.

“You know, I really can’t.”

“Well, anyway, at least we aced our last scene, right?”

“You – did you get an A?”

Strangely, Maggie can’t really remember their scene. She remembers performing it, but she can’t recall what she did or how she felt about it. She did recall a strange sensation unrestrained by thought or self-awareness, the feeling of, *This is it! This is it! Hold on to it!* But in that moment it disappeared, leaving behind that empty feeling of forgetting a good dream. She was *so close*.

“Have a safe flight!” a familiar voice calls out to a departing traveler. Maggie turns to catch a glimpse of a shiny bald head disappearing through an Employees Only door behind the bar. She crouches by her small corner table and waits, just to make sure. Moments later, Anthony reemerges with a rag and wipes down the counter. Maggie hides in the corner for several minutes, fascinated by the sight of her instructor bartending, striking up small talk with cranky patrons, feigning interest in their various travel dramas and complaints. The moment strikes her as something rare, like spotting a celebrity buying groceries in their sweats or realizing the high school mascot is actually the quiet girl from math class. *This isn’t what you’re supposed to be*, she thinks, but isn’t sure what she means by it. He should be meditating in an open field somewhere, or teaching a yoga class, or beating old men at chess in a park, maybe. Something suiting the certain mystique he had retained as their instructor.

Maggie watches Anthony pour mimosas and chat up a couple of well-dressed white-haired ladies. The act resembles a performance, with Anthony playing the role of the young graduate

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paying off student loans. He plays his part well. His human-ness unnerves her. Maggie wonders what Anthony would do if she said hello, forcing his separate worlds to collide. Instead, she studies her pinecone one last time. An unfortunate, deformed glob of glue and slivers of bark vaguely resembling the pinecone it was at the beginning of its life.

The shatter of a broken glass commands Maggie's attention toward the bar, where Anthony stammers apologies and disappears through the employee door, leaving a scowling man dabbing at his suit jacket with a wad of napkins. Maggie takes this opportunity to escape the restaurant unseen and stuffs the pinecone back into its drawstring bag. She reaches to loop it over her head, but something stops her. Instead, she wraps the drawstring tightly around the bag and clutches it in one hand. On her way out the door, she quietly tucks the pinecone into the corner where the bar meets the wall. As she sits waiting to board her flight, Maggie imagines who might find her pinecone. Maybe a curious traveler, sitting bored, will unwrap it and chuckle, tickled by the unexpected content. Maybe the abandoned item will stir suspicion and a TSA agent will be called upon to investigate. Or maybe Anthony will find it. Would he care enough to peek inside? Or to track down its owner? Or, judging its sloppy appearance, would he hastily discard it as trash? Maggie didn't know.