

THE MAN WHO HATED THE NEW YORKER

After three months and 36 psychotherapy sessions, Dr. Gary McGivern realized that he was not only unable to help Stephen Aaronson, but had experienced a rare form of reverse transference and had begun to assume the client's pathological hatred for the esteemed magazine, *The New Yorker*.

Indeed, soon after the therapist sent a self-medicating 4 a.m. email to the "MO-FOs" at the magazine canceling his thirty year office subscription, he was on the phone with a colleague, Dr. Myles Mintz. "Please, Myles," he implored, "you need to save me from myself."

Myles Mintz sat up on the living room sofa where he had fallen asleep, the flat screen tv murmuring. "I don't think I've ever heard you curse, Gary, much less call anyone a mo-fo."

Gary's shrug was barely audible, shoulder pad against the receiver, followed by a snuffle.

And thus a few days later, Myles Mintz was biding his time, thumbing impatiently through the *Jazz Times* on his desk when Mr. Aaronson arrived late for his first appointment. Without so much as a hello or a raised eyebrow, the burly well-dressed client dropped the January 23 issue of the offending magazine on the therapist's desk and muttered, "Did you see this week's pile of projectile diarrhea?"

So no, it didn't take Myles' hard-earned Columbia PhD to learn that Stephen Aaronson, fifty-ish, fit, just the right salt and pepper head full of unplugged hair, was neurotically obsessed with the highly-regarded weekly.

And thus began the psychological excavation of the origins of Stephen's grand disdain for the magazine, the dig going all the way back to the latter golden years of William Shawn when Mr. Aaronson was a French Lit. major in Ann Arbor. "... I loved how elegant and smart it was, the Talk and Shout sections, the invisible fortress around the editors, the extraordinary fiction, the longer-the-better articles ... you know, doc," he said, his voice turning both sonorous and wistful, "Y'know, I once got a note from Hendrick Hertzberg who, in rejecting one of my essays explained how I was just barely missing the right tone."

He leaned forward then, focusing his roving eyes on the psychologist who had clearly no idea who Hendrick Hertzberg might be. "But even then," a smirk appearing on his face, "I already despised the magazine for its prissiness ... those elitist ads, some piece of shit brooch that looks like bent paper clips or that reading lamp for sexless upper East Siders." Aaronson paused then, looked clockwise around the well-appointed office, then counter-clockwise before returning to the doctor's hooded eyes.

Myles took voluminous notes during that first session as Aaronson explained how he maintained his subscription "... after Shawn got the shiv," through the brief Robert Gottlieb period ("...stupid sucker should've stayed with Knopf"), then the darkly glossy days with "that English cow" Tina Brown, and finally 1988 "...when Remnick thankfully took over the reins and the noxious smell of the perfumed pages passed like some farting hog getting off the subway."

"I see," Mintz said, nodding his head, then scribbling a reminder on a Post-It to pick up some apples and check out the James Fitzpatrick Quintet down on St. Mark's Place. "And yet things after Remnick didn't get better?"

Now his lips shifted and he was talking out of the side of his mouth: “Not really. Eventually it all came down to that putrid haughty poetry trying to be art, sexless and pretentious like a fucking brooch, all that hideous lichen and alabaster.”

*

What made Stephen Aaronson particularly intriguing to Myles Mintz was the fact that the rest of this client’s life seemed quite in order, in fact a model of healthy development. The man made a very nice living developing campaigns for Acru Advertising for more than twenty years, had a rather stable family life in tony Bronxville, didn’t drink to excess, and, aside from a daily 10 mg. statin, didn’t take any drugs. He seemed to have a good relationship with his wife and children. Moreover, as far as Myles could determine, Aaronson was not typically self-destructive, not even a risk taker—not a tailgater or a speeder or an extreme anything. He played a little golf, went to plays in the city, played poker with friends twice a month, and had recently begun to attend weekly writing workshops at the Writing Institute at Sarah Lawrence College—and did not seem to harbor any rage against golfers, thespians, card players or his fellow poets. Also, he regularly read several highbrow magazines, including *Harpers* and *The Atlantic*, but didn’t form unhealthy attachments to those publications.

And one might suppose that would have been that, four weeks and twelve wholly repetitious sessions into their relationship—just another disgruntled creative middle-aged guy misusing his talents to make a lot of money pandering to the public, and there’d be no story here—that is, if Stephen Aaronson hadn’t “had it up to here” one afternoon in Mintz’s midtown office (1678 Broadway, btw), his flattened hand just below his nose, his other hand holding out a smoking wastepaper basket from the waiting room.

“Stephen!” Dr. Mintz grabbed his bottle of TAP’D NY, stood and hurried around the desk, pouring water on the ashes. “What the hell is going on?”

Stephen put the stinking, sloshing wastepaper basket on the rug and fell back into the wing chair, waving his hand. “What’s going on is that I fucking loathe Vladimir Karaoecz, that Polish piece of garbage!”

“Well, that’s the last time you’ll do that.”

Aaronson glared at him and crossed his legs.

A few moments later, both men now grim and silent in their respective chairs, Myles picked up the yellow pad, the slim Montblanc his ex-wife had given him rolling onto the desk. “So, Stephen ... let’s try to get away from the old refrain for a minute and do some improvising.”

“Improvising? What the hell are you talking about?” He looked around the office and stared at the famous Harlem photo by Art Kane, that smirk emerging. “We’re one short of a combo here, Myles.”

Myles pressed his lips together and shook his head. “I’m sorry, I meant impromptu work—I’ll ask questions and you answer without thinking.”

Aaronson snorted. “So all you have left now are limp Values Clarification exercises from 1982?” The doctor stared impassively ahead. “Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, I guess, if you must, Myles.”

Dr. Mintz picked up the Montblanc. “How’s Judy?”

“Good.”

“The kids?”

“Good”

“What are they up to?”

“Both still in college, for all I know doing fine. As long as they call on Sundays....,” he said with a wink.

“Acru Advertising?”

“I can do it blindfold, Myles, with my hands tied behind my back and my dick in a knot.”

“Oh?” he said, hopeful for something.

“It’s all right, I guess.”

“All right?”

“Oh Christ, don’t get all psycho-weenie with me, Mintz. It’s a damn job. A very good-paying job that for no good reason that I can discern I’m very good at. Let’s be clear, I’m not here three times a week because I’m having an existential crisis about the meaning of my meaningless job---or because my wife is humping the pool boy or my kids are in trouble or my father punched me out when I tried to kill him and hump my mother. I’m here because I fucking hate *The New Yorker* with a fervor that could crack all the alabaster that shows up in all their pusillanimously puissant poems. And more to the point I’m here in a snit today because of the most recent calamity, that Polish snot monger Vladimir Karaoecz. That poem—if you want to call it that--was a direct fucking insult to Williams!”

“Williams?”

“Yes, Williams.”

“Tennessee Williams?”

“What are you some kind of troglodyte? William Carlos Williams, dumbass.”

“Troglodyte?”

“Jesus, Myles, where did you get that PhD, from the Dollar Store? Wal-Mart? Anyway, let’s cut the crap—after I ripped out the page with Karaoecz’s vomitus and burned it in that tony wastepaper basket in your ridiculously jazzy waiting room,” the doctor’s eyebrows arched, “I felt not one goddamn degree of relief. Not one freakin’ Aahhh! In fact, all I wanted to do was track down the SOB, preferably on the day that he visits the *New Yorker* offices, so I could do them both in with a hand grenade.”

Mintz tried, but could not stop himself from raising his eyebrows even further.

Aaronson snickered. “I’m not that crazy that I don’t think that’s crazy, you know.”

“Frankly, Stephen, I don’t know.”

The client glared at the therapist like he was an impudent child.

“Oh. Well, then, let’s try again to get at the root of this morning’s extreme hatred, which I might say is even extreme for you, Stephen. What was it about Vladimir Karaoecz in particular, that got you so riled up?”

“It’s not about Karaoecz, dumbass. God, you’re dense! It could be Yuri Stefanovich, that egg sucking Commie dog from last week’s rag, or Ping Pong or whatever the hell her name is from back in March or any of their finger-up-the-ass translators ... or,” his voice dropped back into that deep sonorous mode generally reserved for academics, “George Patinsky, that-that-that unreconstituted pussball from Iowa. It’s the whole thing ... the obscure, the pretentious, the sneering highbrow, the self-referential language in the shit they publish as poetry. The alabaster! The lichen! How many ways do I have to say it, Myles? I’ve been ranting about this crap for months.”

“I think I get it, Stephen,” he hedged. “But please indulge me. Let’s start with the first poem that created these murderous rages.”

“Oh shit, Myles Myles Myles, fucking Myles! Maybe you’re not the man for me. Gary certainly got it.” He shifted in the chair. “You know, he once had a poem in *Ploughshares*—and another in *The Sewanee Review*. He got it.”

“That he did. And if you’ll recall, it almost did him in, Stephen.” Aaronson appeared stunned. “So, hmmm, now let’s see, do you think they should be publishing your poems?”

“Well,” scratching the back of his neck with his middle finger and smirking again, “it couldn’t be worse than the crap they print.”

“I see. So . . .,” he raised an eyebrow, the right one, “may I read some of your poetry?”

“Time’s up, doc,” he smiled, tapping his runner’s watch. “See you Friday . . . unless, of course, I give you a call from Rikers . . .”

*

On Friday, Stephen Aaronson strolled in five minutes early with a broad smile on his face, went right over to the desk—not the wingchairs—and picked up the new old issue of *JazzTimes* from the desk and waved it. “I just realized this morning in the shower why I continue to see you even though it’s clear you’re lost when it comes to the poetry of the human mind.”

Myles snapped off the radio, sat up, rubbed his thumb and forefinger together several times and tilted his head in invitation. “I thought we were doing just fine.”

“Apples and oranges, doc, or more to the point, sharps and flats, lento and allegro.”

“Presto,” he corrected.

“You know, you’re a full metal jackass, Myles. Do you know Frank O’Hara’s poem “Why I am Not a Painter”?”

The therapist shook his head, suddenly aware that the pace had picked up and he wasn’t keeping time. Old story.

“Well, I’ve been sitting here for weeks ranting about people who deserve to die because they defile literature, but I’ve been so wrapped up in my own shit that I failed to recognize that I’m surrounded by posters of Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker and fat-cheeks-whatshisname on the walls, and over there.”

Myles refrained from offering “Dizzy.” “So? I like jazz, that’s no secret, Stephen.”

Aaronson swiveled in the chair and pointed to the radio on the book shelf. “I’ll bet anything that if I turned on the Blaupunkt over there right now it would be tuned to WKCR and,” he looked back at the watch, “that lunatic Phil Schaap would just be finishing his daily masturbatory ablutions over Charlie Parker.”

Aaronson stood up and feigned movement to the shelf where the radio sat mute. The doctor knew he had no option but to call his bluff. “Go ahead, Stephen, Make your day.”

The smirk turned into a big lunch meeting smile and he paused. “So what, Myles? *Down Beat* reject a review of yours?”

Mintz took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It actually doesn’t matter whether I do or don’t like *Down Beat*. We’re talking about you, Stephen, your borderline personality.” He put down the pen and looked him straight in the eye: “You’re a very sick man. You need help.”

The client’s smile vanished. He sat down, head drooping. Now it was Myles leaning forward on his elbows. “Oh, I’m sorry, Stephen, did I never offer you your diagnosis? Did you think that hating a magazine or wanting to blow up its offices was a harmless neurosis, a simple case of narcissism?”

Aaronson stood up then and walked over to the “A Great Day in Harlem” photograph—signed by Art Kane—and lifted it off the wall.

“Put that down, Stephen.” He pointed a shaking finger.

“There’s smudge here, Myles.”

“Put it down.”

He pulled a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket, spit right on the glass and started to wipe.”

“Now you’ve gone too far. Put it down now!”

The smirk reappeared. “I Googled you, Myles, and found some old reviews of yours in those other rags in your waiting room. Not bad. Much better than the academic bullshit in *Down Beat*. You must’ve been a lot hipper back then than the douchebag you seem to be now.” Aaronson slowly, deliberately returned the handkerchief to his pocket and then the photograph to the wall, only then turning to face the therapist and tapping his runner’s watch.

*

Myles Mintz spent the weekend at the small cottage in Amagansett, as he often did in the spring after Marcie left him, and managed to catch all four shows at a new little club in Port Jefferson, but heard little music behind the raging conversations with Stephen Aaronson going on in his head. Driving back to the city Sunday night, he left a message with his esteemed colleague, Morton Mulcahey, wondering if he might take on a new client "... of mine who is not responding to treatment."

But when Aaronson showed up Monday afternoon with a peace offering, a framed cloth napkin from the Five Spot signed by none other than Lester Young, Myles relented, deciding that he'd wait until he heard from Mulcahey before terminating treatment. His voice was stern: "Okay, Stephen, one last time: let's get to work." He looked the client in the eye in preparation of breaking every psychoanalytic rule known to humankind: "I'm done fucking around with you, Aaronson. It's time to put up or shut up."

Aaronson pressed his lips together and nodded. "You're right, doc, I'm sick. No one else ever said that to me so simply. I'm desperate, doc. I think I'm at the edge of"

Myles tilted his head. "Of what, Stephen? Do you think you're going to acting out your violent fantasies?"

Aaronson's smile was nothing less than sparkling. "The edge of ... poetry, Myles ... that place where transcendent things happen."

The therapist blew out the electric air suddenly trapped in his lungs. "Let's cut out the bullshit poetry talk. You tell me what you're afraid you're going to do." He stood up and snagged the framed napkin out of the client's hand.

“Oh, that’s not bullshit poetry talk, Myles. It’s you on your beat-to-shit sax going out on a limb.” He pointed to the alto sax in the corner.

“Oh no, Stephen, we’re not going there. You tell me what you’re afraid you’re going to do.”

“Well, the fantasy is pure poetry itself ... I’m going to paper cut Vladimir Karaoecz’s throat from ear to ear—and then I’m going to write a poem about it with his blood.”

Mintz let that sink in for a few seconds. “Well, that seems bizarre, even for you.”

“It may be the only relief I can find.”

“Stephen,” he said in his most somber key and re-crossing his legs, “we’re perilously close to ...”

“To what, doc? Tranqs? Anti-psychotics? The funny farm? Poetry? A sentimental journey to the Vanguard?”

“I’m not joking, Stephen. You may be in greater danger than I originally thought.”

He pressed his lips together. “I was joking, doc. Besides, I said paper cut, not Bowie knife.” Now he looked across the desk in the same practiced way he looked at junior execs that just didn’t have the stuff. “Maybe you’re not up to the tempo of someone like me. Maybe I should just move along.”

“Maybe. In fact--”

“Well,” he said leaning back, enfolded in the wings of the chair, “let’s say we give it a few more meetings, Myles. I haven’t totally given up on you.”

“I’m not sure anymore that I can help you.”

“Oh I know that, herr doctor—there’s no way in hell you can help me. I have to help myself, right?” He was still smiling.

“Right.” Myles was not going to be undermined. “So okay, yes, let’s give it three more sessions.”

“I like that—three rounds, winner take all.”

“There are no winners, Stephen.”

“Right. I forgot.”

“So I’ll see you Wednesday?”

“Right. But since we’re breaking up, Doc, let’s ditch this anal-retentive jazz mausoleum and meet at the 92nd Street Y Wednesday night. I just heard on the radio that George Patinsky is reading.”

Myles wasn’t sure why, but he nodded.

“That’s good, doc, that’s good. Will you bring the wife?”

The doctor leaned back and offered a stony look. Clicked the pen several times.

“Okay then. And then after the reading we’ll get a couple of drinks down at the Vanguard.”

*

Myles Mintz was no fan of poetry per se, but was prepared to be as open to Mr. Patinsky’s work as he was capable—if for no other reason than he wanted to be articulate enough to rebut the client’s rants when they would come.

Walking into the small auditorium, he was surprised to see Gary McGivern seated next to Stephen Aaronson. “Gary?”

He stood. “Myles! What a coincidence! How are you?”

Aaronson lifted his upper lip a la Elvis Presley. “I thought you fellers didn’t believe in coincidence.”

Myles looked at Gary, “I thought you weren’t seeing him anymore . . .”

Gary lifted his soft hands in the still air. “Oh this, no, I’m not, no . . . Stephen just called me up and invited me as a fellow poetry aficionado.”

Myles was tempted to leave, there were just too many professional taboos being broken here, but just then Carlos Herredia-Delgado from the Columbia MFA program was tapped the mic and a few humorless moments of introduction later George Patinsky was up at the podium with his artfully disheveled hair and bony hands.

To his disappointment, Myles found the poet nearly as pompous and preening and obscure as his poetry, which was every bit as pompous and preening and obscure as Aaronson said it was . . . and he was soon slip-sliding on Patinsky’s droning buzz into a memory of those halcyon days in Amagansett with Julia, when a mushy tomato whizzed by the poet’s head, standing motionless, mid-syllable, the orange orb splattered on the screen behind him.

Everyone in the audience turned, stunned, toward Myles who spun to the side to stop Aaronson before he did more damage, but it was Gary McGivern standing beside him, pointing his finger, “That’s what I think of your poetry, Patinsky!”

Which was when Aaronson stood, reached into his tweed coat pocket and heaved the second tomato, yelling “You stink to high hell, you fuckin’ pedant!” as it thumped and splattered against the lectern.

No one in the polite upper west side audience said anything—not a word—

perhaps thinking that it was “theater” and Patinsky himself was in on it? After all, Myles thought, it is New York and everyone is stinkbreath afraid to look unpolished.

Nevertheless, the startled poet merely looked back at the splattered fruit on the screen bearing the cover of his new collection and then continued his reading.

When Myles looked to the side, his companions were gone. He waited patiently then, hands clasped on his lap until the end of the poem and more knowing applause, and walked of the room and out of the building into the sweet spring air.

Both Aaronson and McGivern were waiting for him on the street, smoking cigarettes.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” he said to Gary, more surprised than critical.

McGivern scrunched up his lips and looked at the cigarette sideways like it was manna. “I don’t, Myles, but I have to tell you that throwing that tomato was like getting laid. By the time I got out to the sidewalk I was spent, as happy as I’ve been in a long long time. Then when Stephen offered me a cigarette, it just felt like the right thing to do. Want one?”

Myles shook his head. “What the hell were you two thinking?”

Aaronson was in the street then, hailing a cab. The psychologist merely shrugged.

“And what’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know, Myles.” He winced. “I just can’t listen to spoiled people whine anymore. I need poetry in my life.”

“But we were just at a goddamn poetry reading, Gary—and you threw a tomato at the goddamn poet!”

“That wasn’t poetry.” He turned. “Here’s the cab, Myles. Let’s get in.”

“Where we going?”

“Where are we all going, Myles?”

“I need to get home.”

Stephen slid in and called back, “Come on, you pussy!” but Myles closed the door on his laughing companions and watched as the cab drove off down Lexington Ave.

Moments later he hailed another cab, slid into the empty back seat, leaned forward, found his voice long enough to tell the driver 172 Henry Street, and sank back.

*

Stephen Aaronson showed up three days later for his regular Monday afternoon appointment.

“Why have you come here, Stephen?”

He seemed a little subdued as he sank back in the wingchair. “Unfinished business.” A shrug.

“Oh?”

Aaronson stood. “Did you see that near perfect peg at his stupid melon?”

Myles smiled in spite of himself.

Aaronson made like he was pitcher on the mound, got into his set, wound up and heaved an imaginary missile right at the Art Kane photo.

The therapist sat up straight in the highbacked chair, “Let’s just cut the crap before you do something you’ll regret, Stephen.”

Stephen Aaronson’s jaw dropped open. In that moment he appeared surrounded by light, a cloud passing? “Ah...you’re so right, Myles. You are fucking right! It’s all about regret! One has to have the balls to step into regret. ”

Myles reached for the pad on his desk. “I’m going to give you the name of a colleague who may be able to help you better than I.” He paused, expecting the look of panic on the client’s face. “Then I advise you to go home to your wife and your good life and forget about *The New Yorker*. Please. We’re done here. Let’s just shake hands like civilized men and part ways.”

“Too late, once again, herr doctor, always a beat behind, aren’t you? I cut it off with you the moment I held that tomato in the palm of my hand. Frankly, I owe it all to you.” And turning, his right hand slipping into his coat pocket, “I’ve got one more beefsteak . . .,” which he held up, cupped in his fist like a grenade, and which hit the therapist hard enough to knock him backward along with the leather chair.

Myles wasn’t knocked out. The snot, if not the breath, had been knocked out of him. All he could do was lay there in the overturned chair, legs up in the air. “What the hell?” he cried out.

“Don’t worry, Myles, I’m not going to hurt you. That was just a wake up call, a little haiku, if you will.”

“Please go, Stephen,” he whimpered. “Please leave me alone.”

“Oh Jesus, Myles, stop the whining!” He picked up the alto sax leaning in the corner, walked over to the desk and pushed a pile of folders onto the rug. “I’m here on a last ditch effort to save you.” He climbed up on the desk then with a loud grunt, looked down at the supine doctor, legs in the air, with that flashy smile and wiggled his fingers. He looked around the well-appointed office.

“Myles,” he continued, “I’m here to tell you that Gary’s waiting for me in the car . . . and we’re headed over to 25 West 43rd with a shitload of mushy beefsteaks—death by

tomatoes, we're calling it. For you. To prove that old sot Dylan Thomas wrong—after the first death, there are many more to come. Wanna join us?"

Myles just stared at the ceiling.

"So?"

Myles continued staring at the ceiling, the tiny cracks in the plaster.

"So it goes, right? Isn't that what Vonnegut wrote?" He dropped the sax on the floor and leaped.

The room shook with Aaronson's landing, the sax crushed, the Coltrane photograph falling off the wall, the glass splintering. He looked over at the shattered glass. "Oops. I'd say I'm sorry, but frankly it doesn't rise to the level of regret. So it goes."

Stephen Aaronson walked over to the door then, grabbed the brass doorknob. "I want to thank you for everything, Myles. I feel much better now. I do. You don't know it, but you're a terrific therapist. Gary says so, too."