

Who's Running This Thing, Anyway?

My first beef with Bromley the open mic host came during the middle of a blizzard eight years ago. The snow was driving and wet, and I entered the Moonbeam Lounge caked in it.

I had been an open mic spectator for weeks, months actually, slowly building up my nerve. It was a confidence game, really, the whole getting up there with a guitar, strumming a few major barre chords, singing a few bars of an original song, maybe a cover, probably Dylan.

My debut would have come a lot sooner if it weren't for Bromley. He made people sign up two months in advance to get a slot. I was on the list for this evening, and weather be damned, I was playing.

I hated the idea of performing in public. I barely could play in front of close friends or girls with whom I had been naked and vulnerable. But I knew I had to start somewhere if I were going to make anything of myself in music. And I had some decent songs. I could play a lick, craft a lyric, warble in tune. My friend Alfredo was always encouraging me to hit up the open mics. He thought my voice sounded like a cross between Jonathan Richman and Lou Reed. Some girl I slept with after a night of too many G&Ts said a mix of Leonard Cohen and Johnny Cash. It was always a mix, never one singer. If anyone knew what that meant, they never told me.

Bromley the open mic host was no mouse of a man. After everyone's two-song set, he'd climb on stage, grab the mic, pirouette, and ramble on for five, ten minutes the most insipid garbage: bathroom jokes, penis jokes, fart jokes. He'd fake blow his nose into the microphone, pretending he was sick, to elicit some kind of twisted sympathy from the audience.

And this man was the gatekeeper to the open mic. If you wanted to play at the Moonbeam, you had to contend with Bromley. There was no way around it.

It was a sparse crowd this evening. Two of the first three sign-ups bailed. Bromley wailed at their weakness: “People are afraid of a little snow. Ooooh snow, it makes my skin a little wet and cold. I’m going to melt in the snow.” He tiptoed around the stage, a rhino navigating a minefield. “Ouch, a snowflake just flew into my eye. So sharp and painful.” The crowd loved it. Then he looked up at the ceiling, like a stupefied dunce trying to gather his senses. “So who’s up next? Who’s running this thing, anyway?”

Bromley was a gargantuan slob, unkempt in the most astonishing ways. His beard was a veritable nest of salt and pepper twigs that corkscrewed down to his belly. His hoodies were two sizes too small. When he reached up to stretch, the hoodie would climb up above his belly button, exposing a massive tire of white hairy flesh. His jeans, conversely, were two sizes too large and drooped in the other direction, so that when he leaned down to pick up a mic chord, he revealed the vaunted plumber’s crack. I’d like to say that his face put people at ease, but even that carried a degree of horror, with his raccoon eyes and comically small nose.

I was due up tenth and had a while to sit around. I eased my nerves by having a beer and then another. And then a third.

Lucas, an open mic regular, was up ninth. When he went on, I hurried into the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and tried to stifle my hyperventilating. When Lucas finished, Bromley hobbled up on stage and took the mic. “Lucas, everyone. Give it up for the sweet bedroom sounds of Lucas, oh yeah.” Bromley swiveled his hips, like a grotesque Elvis. “People are making babies to the sounds of our man Lucas.”

With my guitar, I sidled to edge of the stage, hoping my presence would usher Bromley off. Drunker than I realized or simply overwhelmed with jitters, my legs began tangoing with themselves. A tightness gripped my chest. I desperately wanted to get up there and get it over with.

Bromley continued, “There’s no better time to make a baby than during a blizzard, putting some Lucas on the radio, watching the snow fall, and getting down to *business*.” He finally glanced over at me, looked up to the ceiling and then said, “Who’s running this thing, anyway?” He pulled a wrinkled paper out of his pocket. “Up next we got Rob—?” He twisted his face into a grimace, as if he were suddenly saddled with a broccoli smoothie. “*Kelpradish*? Is that a name or is that something they’re serving up at the Vegan Delight?” He assumed the aristocratic voice of an elderly woman, poking his pinky into the corner of his mouth: “I will have the kelpradish sandwich and please hold the mayo. I have high cholesterol.” Unfortunately, it wasn’t over. He morphed his voice yet again, this time into the sedate host of the Scripps National Spelling Bee. “The kelpradish is found in the brackish waters off the coast of Nova Scotia. It is a thick pulpy green starch that can cure both hangovers and constipation. Referred to colloquially as the Metamucil of the sea. And no, I will not use it in a fucking sentence!” The hipsters were falling out of their seats in laughter.

I was close to saying screw this and leaving, but Bromley trudged off stage, ceding it to me. There was no turning back.

About my performance, I’ll keep it brief. I played a couple originals. Nothing to write home, or *Rolling Stone*, about. My first song was about a prostitute with a cocaine addiction who took a leap over a reindeer and landed face-down in the snow—in retrospect, a metaphor just begging for ridicule; the second, a wistful reminiscence of my home state of Oregon with

evocations of the mountains and the ocean and a reference to a famous long-dead American writer. My voice cracked during the high parts, and I missed an entire verse. It was a shaky performance at best.

I couldn't help but notice Bromley in the audience as I performed. He left an indelible image, slumped in a director's chair, legs splayed out extra wide, ultra-hetero style, drinking a Slurpee with a pink spiral straw and gorging on a bloody hamburger. Droppings of mustard and relish ornamented his beard. He swiped at them with his fleshy hand, transferring the goop from one part of his body to another.

Meanwhile I had broken a healthy sweat that clotted the hair around my temples and dripped down my neck.

Bromley got up on stage with me and grabbed the mic, "Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for our favorite sea vegetable, Mr. Rob Kelpradish."

I stepped off stage and walked toward my seat. My back turned to him, Bromley sang out: "Ernest Hemingwaayaayaayaay," mocking how I trilled it in my song.

I wasn't the type to laugh at myself. I bruised easily. A banana in a backpack. I don't whether it was a culmination of my annoyance at Bromley, my vulnerability torn open, or just my quick temper, but I suddenly felt a burst of anger come over me. And I shouted at him: "You really should learn to keep your mouth shut Bromley. I don't know who you think you are."

The background murmuring slowly ceased and then bled into silence.

"You're supposed to be running an open mic, not making this into your own personal stand-up comedy act, trying to steal the show, mocking everyone."

Bromley stared at me, his mouth agape, fiddling with a guitar cord.

I found myself walking toward the exit door. “You’re up they’re like a–, like a fucking buffoon!”

Someone at my back spoke sharply, “Hey man, take it easy. He’s just joking around up there.”

I slammed open the door and rushed outside to meet the full force of winter. A whipping wind pounded my face, the scornful snow singed my eyes. I cursed Bromley’s name and shambled into the cold and dark night, feeling profoundly alone.

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I never stepped foot in the Moonbeam Lounge again. I was embarrassed by my behavior that evening and averse to running into Bromley or anyone who bore witness to my meltdown. At the same time, I felt justified in my anger and that Bromley’s comeuppance was deserved, overdue in fact, and so I didn’t torture myself with regret for too long.

I decided to shelve my musical ambitions indefinitely. I realized that my ultimate stage would be the mirror in my bedroom, a guitar strapped to my shoulders, a sheet of paper by my side to remember lyrics, and with that I was at peace.

Over the next couple years, I focused on other endeavors. I joined the local mycological club and discovered an innate joy in foraging for chanterelles, chicken of the woods, and other gems of the forest. Mushroom hunting was a hobby well-suited for a quiet and studious mind such as mine. I learned the contents of the mushroom guidebook inside and out and took a special pride in my ability to find and identify species in the wild and then share this knowledge with friends. When I wasn’t filling my wicker basket with fungi, I was busy pursuing a master’s in secondary education with a focus on American history. All this left precious little time for music, anyway.

And then one summer, my life experienced a sea change. I decided to move. I chose the town next to the one where I grew up to be closer to family and press the big reset button on life. A job opened to teach U.S. history at the public high school there that fall, and I jumped on it. My news came as a surprise to my friends, who were baffled by my decision to move to a small town, but the itch to leave the city had been building gradually within me for some time.

That final week before I moved, I tried to squeeze in as many visits with friends as I could. One night, I got together with my buddy from New Zealand, the Kiwi Kid, at the Salamander, a hotspot for live music.

We were enjoying the bittersweet taste of grapefruit summer shandies and the music. Two middle-aged men were playing oldies, songs like *Summer Breeze*, *Come Monday*, *Into the Mystic*. I knew it was solipsistic of me to think this way, but I couldn't help see these songs as the soundtrack to my imminent move, my new life.

Bromley must have come in while the Kiwi Kid and I were chatting. I turned my head and there he was, lugging equipment into the Salamander: amps, mic stands, instruments. I immediately felt the old rage course through me. I thought it had washed away when I left the Moonbeam Lounge that snowy night so long ago, but to my surprise it hadn't.

Bromley stood next to the stage behind us to our right. I could have reached out and grabbed him by the neck, strangled him, he was that close.

The duo was playing another of my favorites, *Wild Horses*. When they finished, Bromley shouted at them, "What are you guys still doing up there? It's nine-fifteen."

The men looked at each other and shrugged. The lead singer responded: "Yeah, so what?"

“I’m with Soapbox Suds, that’s what’s so what. We’re on at ten. You guys are supposed to be off at nine. We’re here every Thursday at ten.”

“Off by nine? Who said that?”

“Those are the rules.” Bromley kept his arms crossed over his chest.

I couldn’t help but get pulled into the dispute. I had been digging the music, the beers had been going down easy, maybe too easy, and it was my farewell evening with the Kiwi Kid.

“Who made these rules?” The lead guitarist said. “Nine o’clock? Your band’s not even here yet.”

“Listen,” Bromley shouted. “We play here every Thursday. When you booked with John, he let you know the rules. So pack up your shit and get off.”

“Yeah, well I don’t care who your band is,” the singer yelled back. “Who do you think you are?”

“I don’t know who you think *you* are,” Bromley said. “You’re lucky to have this gig. I should have cut you off at nine. I gave you fifteen minutes.”

It was two-on-one, and while I generally rooted for the underdog, this was an exception. I got off my stool and walked over to them. “Look who’s talking Bromley!” I shouted at Bromley, meeting his eyes straight on. “You’re not too worried about other people’s times when you’re hosting the open mic at the Moonbeam, are you? Rambling on and on, a big star stealing the show.”

“These guys should know better,” Bromley yelled back. “This isn’t the first time this has happened with them.”

“Everyone here—,” I gestured around the bar. “is loving these guys. What, does it take you a full hour to plug in some amps? Are you going to do some calisthenics on stage first? Yoga?”

Bromley waved me off with a flick of his wrist, grabbed some equipment, and began trundling it up on stage. The duo followed him. The three of them continued to jaw back and forth. Bromley assembled his stage as they worked to deconstruct theirs. The bartender had kicked up the music so I couldn’t hear their argument anymore. I was tempted to get up and continue going at Bromley, but I had said my piece, got my intentions across. I was good.

“Wow, good for you Rob,” the Kiwi Kid nudged me on the arm. “Out for justice.”

“Well, it’s more than justice. I have history with that guy.”

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In time, however, Bromley faded into the margins of my own history book. The first year living in a small town was certainly an adjustment period, but I had enough to keep me busy and soon found myself pretty well settled.

I immersed myself in my history classes. Teaching proved to be a simple pleasure, which came as a nice surprise to me. A bonus. There was so much ground to cover, so many facets and angles to examine and reexamine in U.S. history, from pre-Columbus to the Revolutionary War to World War II. If it were an advanced class and we were ahead of the curve by May, we’d wade into the morass of Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, Watergate, all the turbulent stuff from the nineteen sixties and seventies, which kept things interesting to me as an educator.

On a personal level, delving into the big events in history made my own life appear small and insignificant. And that could be quite humbling at times. But I learned to sublimate those feelings and began to see the beauty in my life. I saw how uncomplicated and easy things were

for me compared to those who had gone before and the struggles they had endured. More and more I remembered to stop and smell the roses because I could.

A couple years ago, I reconnected with Alice Winter, an old flame from high school and we'd been going strong ever since. I hadn't gone ring shopping just yet, but was getting close. She was a nurse who dabbled in painting, pointillist stuff, mostly portraits and some nature scenes. A gallery in our humble downtown had invited her to show her work the last two weeks of October, and we both were thrilled. The opening reception was the same night as parent-teacher night for me, so I would be missing most of it. I wanted to be there but she understood. It was unfortunate timing.

This was my fifth parent-teacher night. It was no longer an event I dreaded, but just one I had to bear, an inevitable, very small part of my job as a teacher. Parent-teacher night wrapped at eight o'clock. I looked at the clock and saw that I had only ten minutes to go. No parents had trickled in during the last twenty minutes, and so I began gathering my materials, stuffing notebooks and stray pieces of paper into my backpack. Suddenly I heard a rapping on the classroom door. Startled, I looked up. I almost didn't recognize him at first. Fifty pounds lighter. Still bearded, but no longer a hobo beard. Someone had shorn and shaped it in the last month. Bromley. What the hell was he doing here?

"U.S. history? Kelpradish?" he asked.

"Yes," I nodded, in shock to say anything more.

He walked over and extended his hand. "Tim Bromley. Kyle Johnson's father."

Kyle Johnson? The scrawny kid who sat in the back row, mumbled when I called on him, and spent most of class with his head down, doodling in his notebook?

“Hi Tim, Rob Kelpradish,” I said. I felt a strange mix of anger and nostalgia at seeing Bromley again. “I recognize you from the Moonbeam Lounge. The open mic.” It didn’t occur to me in the moment to pretend not to recognize him.

“Ah, yes, you do look familiar. Kelpradish—the name sounded familiar when I read it. My memory isn’t so great. A lot of things just sound familiar.” He held up his Dunkin’ Donuts Styrofoam cup. “I switched over to coffee full-time a few years ago. Much less foggy now.” He laughed. A friendly, self-deprecating laugh.

“You made it just in time,” I said and tapped my watch. “Long drive?”

“Only two hours but it goes by fast,” he paused. “Who am I kidding? It fucking sucked.”

I involuntarily laughed. “Am I keeping you? What time does this end?” he asked.

“Eight technically, but it’s okay.” Alice’s reception was over at nine so I was hoping to catch the tail end of it, but I didn’t need to let Bromley know that.

“Eight seems on the early side. Parents coming from out of town. I mean, who’s running this thing, anyway?”

“I hear you.” It was my standard response when I didn’t agree but didn’t care enough to argue. “Are you still hosting at the Moonbeam Lounge?” I hadn’t thought of that place in years, the whole music scene in years. But seeing Bromley made me curious all of a sudden to know what was happening, what had changed since I left the city. Music was now an afterthought. The last time I strummed my guitar was the previous summer on a camping trip to Acadia when friends coaxed me to bring along my guitar to lead us in some music around the campfire.

“No, I gave up that gig a few years ago. October of 2013, I think. Or was it 2014? Doesn’t matter. It’s been awhile. Jen Doolin hosts now. Really good singer-songwriter. Do you still play?”

“Not anymore really. That was another life.”

“I’d say that you should pop in there, give it a go again, but that’d be a haul,” he said. “I played a gig up in this area years ago. Don’t remember where. It was a one-time thing. I try to avoid that, with Kyle here and my ex. I prefer to keep these parts of my life separate.”

“That makes sense. I would probably do the same thing.” It felt like a betrayal to my former self to agree with Bromley.

I peeked up at the clock and did the math. I had just lost a couple minutes at Alice’s reception, and we hadn’t even got to Kyle yet. “You came all this way for your son. That’s a dedicated parent,” I tried to bring the conversation around.

“I haven’t always been, that’s for sure.” Bromley rubbed his hands through his hair and looked down at the table away from me. “I’m trying to make up for lost time. Put it that way. I mean, Kyle’s fifteen. *Fifteen*. Hard to believe.”

“I hear that all the time from parents. How fast they grow up.”

“So how’s the kid doing? Kyle?”

Kyle was one of those students who managed Bs but didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

“He’s doing okay,” I said to keep it simple. “How’s he liking the class?”

“I think he likes it a lot. Says his two favorite classes are U.S. history and math. Totally weird. My two favorite classes were, let me think, smoking pot behind the school dumpster and gym. Yeah, I know. Hard to imagine a slob like me moving around. But there was a time.”

Bromley laughed and so did I.

“I think he got like a B+ or A- on some paper he wrote for your class,” Bromley said.

“He e-mailed it to me to read afterwards. I was impressed. Good writer, that kid. Takes after his mother. Definitely not me.”

“I don’t recall offhand what Kyle got, but that’s a good grade,” I leaned in a little bit. “Between you and me, Tim, I only gave out about five As on that paper and just a few B plusses. Kyle was definitely in the top third.”

“Top third, how about that!” Bromley leaned back in his seat, proud, and looked around the classroom. “And that’s clearly better than bottom third, right?” He lifted one eyebrow, like John Belushi. I couldn’t help but laugh. Had Bromley become funnier, or had I always just missed the humor, being caught up in my own egotism, my own insecurities?

“It certainly is.”

Bromley looked up at the clock and said, “Shit, I’m keeping you over.” He slapped the arms of his chairs and pushed himself to his feet. “Kyle’s waiting for me. I’m teaching him to bang around on the bass. Hopefully I won’t be cutting into his history homework, Teach?” He winked.

I chuckled. “You’re good. Don’t have an exam scheduled til next week.”

“Music to my ears.”

Before he bounded out, Bromley asked me again if I ever thought about popping down to the Moonbeam, trying my hand at the open mic. He promised to put in a good word for me with the new open mic host, let her know I was coming long distance, bump me up on her list. I thanked him for the thought, appreciated the sentiment, but had to say no. That was all ancient history now.