

## Three Problems

### Ego

My plan was to bring Gino joy. Thankfully, he did not realize that I had a plan, because if he did realize that I had a plan, then the plan would have been blown. Planning interactions with people, at least openly, I think, is not generally considered a grace.

But he ruined the plan anyway. Even though there was no way he knew that I had a plan, he still ruined it, because he's Gino, and that's what Gino does. He ruins things. He knows, for instance, that I don't care about guns; that I, in fact, believe that all the guns in the world should be melted down and repurposed as water slides. But there we were after the wake, in his basement, in our suits: drunk. Him taking apart his father's .22. Him cleaning every piece. Him praising the beauty of this part and that. Me asking questions, in excruciating detail, about every little screw, the pitch of the thread, the meaning of caliber, the type of wood for the stock. Me selecting my words as carefully as he dismantled the firing pin. Me, sitting, trying desperately not to show how peculiar I thought it was, that he had not mentioned one thing about his father. Him, sitting, probably trying desperately not to show how peculiar he thought it was, that right then, all of a sudden, I cared about his hobby.

### Superego

Our plan was to rent a movie. The problem was, and always is, in the selection process. Scary movies for her evoke unmentionably bad memories. Comedies for me are never funny enough. Cartoons for both of us are bad because of our childhoods. Romances are nice,

sometimes, but around that particular night, we were having trouble finding time for a certain aspect of romance, usually defined as romance, so romances were out. Action movies she finds stupid, so those were out. Documentaries she finds irritating because, according to her, for the month following us watching a documentary, I always become brooding and didactic and blame her for the degradation of our environment (her showers are too long), or accuse her of ignoring world hunger (she lets leftovers rot in the fridge). But this accusation by her simply isn't true. Those were virtues of mine before the stupid movie. Documentaries, anyway, are out.

That's how problematic the selection process is. All of those genres are on the exclusion list before we even begin the haggling, which on this particular night, began with me suggesting a movie about a couple that adopted a boy and raised him as if they gave birth to him. After he graduates high school, he finds out that they did not give birth to him, and so this existential vacuum is created, and he loses his shit, and his adoptive parents were alcoholics anyway, so he kills them, and then goes on this search for his real parents, and blah blah blah, it sounded interesting, and that's what I wanted to watch, but my movie description reminded her of a recurring argument we'd been having over our age, and whether or not it was too late for children, so it was out.

She countered with a movie about a boy whose father drinks too much and abuses him emotionally, so the boy grows up with these really negative feelings for his father that eventually manifest in him never talking to his father again, and then becoming an alcoholic himself, and emotionally abusive to anyone who cares to know him.

I said, That sounds horrible.

She said, Because of your dad? which made no sense to me, because my dad was not a terrible alcoholic dad, the movie just sounded trite. Yes, my dad was a bit of a racist. Yes, my dad was a bit of a misogynist. But he was not a terrible dad.

Yes, he'd say things like, a good woman is one who won't turn her nose when you smell, who won't lie when you're seeking the truth, who won't spread too much jelly where there should be jam; a good woman is one who likes to stay home and watch the game instead of travel to far-away places; a good woman is one who is faithful in the biblical sense, even when her mind yearns for something greater; a good woman is balanced all around, for example: a woman with an ass disproportionate to her tits will grow fat; a woman with tits disproportionate to her ass will grow fat; a woman who is fat is fat. A woman who likes to argue, even when she knows she is wrong, is a bitch. A woman who likes to argue, and is fat, is a fat bitch. A woman, son, is not something to be understood.

Yes he said these things, but that does not mean that he was a terrible father, or that he had passed on his strange prejudices to me. It just means that I know about those things, and that he said them to me.

But I did not say them.

So to her, I said, Maybe we should get another TV, and watch our own movies, at our own leisure, until we resolve our neuroses.

And of course she didn't like that idea, but I didn't know she didn't like that idea because she expressed displeasure using words, I could just tell by the way she pursed her lips, and then rolled her fat ass off the couch to retreat to the bedroom. And praise Jesus she did, because underneath all that blubber lived something I could understand: that black thing with

the two triangle buttons for volume, and the two square buttons to change the channel. The thing that always brings me comfort, but whose name I can never remember.

## Id

The plan, if executed correctly, was to pair Sarah and Gino. Both of them had recently ended traumatic long-term relationships: Sarah's in divorce, Gino's in a dumping.

They were not well. Sarah couldn't walk without someone under her arm to hold her steady. Gino couldn't watch TV, hold a fork, or look in the mirror without being drunk. They both became gaunt after a few weeks: skinny thighs, knobby knees, ribs showing above booze-bloated bellies.

Every hungover Sunday they both would maroon themselves beneath their sheets before finding just enough strength to put on some clothes and drive to my wife's and my house, where we would nourish them, tell them they were beautiful, listen to them compliment our wonderful relationship, listen to them damn our relationship for being so wonderful, listen to them cry for having such a high standard to meet: our relationship.

We would dress in long robes, my wife and I, to make the environment more comforting. We would make sure that they never showed up on the same day because we were afraid that their gloom, if combined, would make us hate them.

But pairing them was the long term plan. We couldn't think of a better pairing, on paper, than Sarah and Gino. Both very attractive. Both Jewish. Both friends of ours. They both had some problems, but I had a plan for those problems. A plan to disguise those problems. A plan to cultivate a soft filter of understanding, so when the problems became apparent, they

wouldn't pour down like acid rain on the carefully contrived fibers of their relationship, but instead sprinkle down like an annoying drizzle. Plans and plans and plans I had.

And that's when my wife dropped out, after I explained to her the plans. "Planning our friend's futures is arrogant and weird," she said.

To which I said, "Doing nothing could lead to their deaths."

But she did not recognize the severity of their loneliness. She wanted nothing of it. Aloof, I called her in my head. I feel for them, I thought to myself. And so I waited for a Saturday when my wife was working to invite them both for breakfast.

I prepared eggs for Gino, and pancakes for Sarah. When Sarah showed up first, I nonchalantly mentioned that we would be entertaining another guest.

She asked, "Who are we were entertaining?"

I said, "This guy."

She asked, "Who?"

And then I said, "This guy, he's a friend, he's an engineer from work. But don't worry, he's not the type of engineer that says awkward things at parties, and has trouble discerning facial expressions, he's more like the type of engineer who enjoys designing and building relationships with his friends."

This, of course, was a joke. A joke that Sarah did not understand. I could tell that she did not understand by the fact that she did not laugh, and by the fact that I am an engineer, and have trouble with jokes. And facial expressions.

So we were quiet for a few moments, which made me feel awkward; a feeling I most definitely did not plan on feeling, but a feeling, in hindsight, that might have been a perfect

vacuum for Gino to fill, had he been there, which he was not, because he is Gino, and he always ruins the plans.

So I cracked a couple more eggs into the pan to look busy, and to fill the vacuum, which only populated the pan with several more eggs than could be consumed, and made it seem like I was trying to obfuscate the vacuum of awkwardness, until Sarah asked, out of ether, “Why would I worry about him?”

This must have been a reference to something I had said earlier, but at that moment in time had forgotten, so there was more awkward silence. Until it happened. Him. He blasted through the door with two bottles of champagne, one bottle of O.J., clean hair, and a drunken air of confidence, that could only mean one thing, that he was drunk. He said something suave, like: I’m drunk, and I’m happy, so let’s get drunker.

And so we sat and drank and ate pancakes and eggs. They laughed and told jokes and I fed them more booze. When there was a lull in the laughter, I pulled out a joint. We smoked. We laughed some more. They left together. They partied and dated for months after that. It was a tenuous foundation to build off of, but still within the specifications of the plan.

When it appeared that their relationship was serious, my wife and I began inviting them over for dinners. We would cook salmon, steak, hand-rolled sushi. We would do it because we loved both of our friends. We would do it because we were happy that they were together.

Once in a while, at these dinners, one or the other of these friends would pull me aside in the hall, to quietly ask about some foible of the other. At these unexpected times, I would say to one or the other that the foible was an amazing trait of that person, wasn’t it? The

passion. The keen sarcasm. The ability to drink more than most (Gino). The ability to apologize (Sarah).

Their relationship went a year like this before the light drizzle turned acidic. Sarah called. It was Gino. His alcoholism was not improving. He became jealous when she went out with friends. He left nasty messages on her phone. He was a kind guy, she said, a romantic guy when sober. But he was jealous and weird when he drank.

I said to her, He needs to stop drinking.

She agreed, but did not know how to help him.

I said, It would be helpful if you led by example.

She said, She didn't have a problem with her own drinking, and she enjoyed a drink here and there, so drinking sensibly would not be a freedom that she would be willing to give up.

I said, For love, sacrifice is endless.

She said, I love him but I'm not in love with him.

I said, Let me talk to him. Please be understanding.

I had a plan for this. I called Gino. He said that he was confused by her. That she was sending him mixed messages. She would always want him to come and sleep over, but only after hanging out with friends. He said that except for in bed, they were very rarely alone. And when they were alone, she was always on her phone. Her friends, while all very nice, weren't necessarily his friends, so the jokes that they would tell, and the way that they would tell them, he didn't always understand. The distraction of all these friends made it difficult to build a relationship with her. When he told her he loved her, she said something vague, like, I love you as a friend too. Gino said that it was hard to be happy without a sign of growth in their

relationship, but that she was the most awesome girl he had ever met. He wanted that closeness. He wanted to move in with her soon. It had been a year, after all. He admitted he was drinking a lot, but that it was just a crutch.

I had a plan for this. I knew Sarah could be quite aloof sometimes. I called her back. I said that Gino is a sensitive man who needed to be treated with more respect than a wishy-washy answer to his saying I love you. I said that men, while stupid, are sentient beings with feelings just like you. I told her that she needed to empathize. To have some compassion.

She felt bad. She said that I was right, that he deserved more respect than that. She called him shortly after and said that she just wanted to be friends.

I had a plan for this. I called Gino. He was drunk. He said she was nasty anyways. That her pussy stank.

I said that she was my friend and that that was neither a nice thing to say, nor was it an important thing to say. I asked him to name a deep cavity into the human body that didn't stink.

He said that he knew it wasn't important, that he was just hurt and was thinking of something to devalue her in his mind. She was so perfect and he would never be able to find someone like her ever again.

I said that he was being silly. I told him I'd make him some scrambled eggs. I told him I had a plan.

I called Sarah. I told her I was upset with how she handled the whole thing.

She said, "You're upset? What about me? Your friend Gino is out of control. He's been at the bar every night. I went in with a couple of friends and he stumbled into our group, saying



he wanted to talk with me, and then he started asking my friends how I've been doing, because he's been doing lousy. And then I started crying, and that made him angry for some reason."

"Please just empathize with him," I said. "He has a lot of anger right now."

"I know he does," she said. "He grabbed my arm and yanked me outside. He bruised me he grabbed it so hard. The whole time he was saying, I just want to talk, I just want to talk, but he was saying it in this stern way, and he was being aggressive enough that a guy at the bar became upset and pushed him off of me. He was so drunk he fell on the ground. I empathize with him but I've never walked home alone and been so scared in my life. I thought he was going to follow me."

"Please just empathize," I said. But I probably should have just shut up, because it was right then I realized that Gino, me, my father, and possibly every man who has ever lived on this earth had totally fucked up the plans.