

## Bad Day at Writing School

Aron, not double-A Aaron, but single-A battery Aron, had his story all worked out. It was a little bit futuristic—okay, totally sci-fi—but it had a hint of the storyline from “The Searchers” and perhaps a dash of “Taxi Driver”. Aron wasn’t so much mixed up as he was slightly confused. Old movies cut his veins, but fantasy was his LSD. His story was about a robot that was perfectly engineered and still made mistakes, but no one could question its ability to turn a shit storm into a light mist. The robot, ignominiously named but not necessarily christened as Robot 7, was his star, if not his northernmost star. He was the universe’s only bot that was three sheets to the wind, a breath of fresh air catching high sails, all the while resembling a boat sinking to the bottom of troubled seas. No problem. Aron knew he had the goods and could read his story with the best of them as long as the class ticked along, one story at a time.

“Dr. Martin held his thoughts like hush puppies, away from the wind, out of the cold, next to his heart and somewhere near his liver. Bile was all he had to offer,” read Conrad, the last reader before Aron got his shot. Bile, indeed. This prick was the worst writer in class, and Aron gagged every time he opened his mouth. He had no chops—excusable—but it didn’t stop there because he was boring, too. Unforgiveable.

“Dr. Martin had papers to grade—he was always simpatico with his first-year students’ essays—and he never factored in their nuanced ramblings or their pathetic grammar when parsing their grades.”

Yawn. Another story about academics.

Aron had been accepted to the prestigious Writer’s Workshop on the strength of an essay he had scribbled out on his iPad after a night of consuming some high-proof Humboldt Havoc, which, according to his medical herbalist, was nastier than the Rogue Valley Purple Kush that had been filling his dance card for the last few months. His essay was about neuron ninjas free-lancing throughout the brain and causing major disruptions in common sense. These were bad neuron ninjas, the kind with no moral anchor, a sense of fair play, or just common decency. Ultimately they destroyed our brains and we died.

When the university reached out to him, offered a scholarship, Aron checked his skepticism and cheerily told himself: I think they like what I do.

And now he was sitting here listening to a fellow writer writing about his teachers, or about what their lives are like, or about how much they booze and get high, or about what kind of sex they have, or, who cares?

Aron’s mind was drifting as the critiques went babbling along. He was thinking about the voices he would use as he read the parts of his story, maybe reading the women’s voices straight, while faking Wayne for “The Searchers” part and DeNiro in “Taxi Driver”. “Are you talking to *moi*?” Robot 7 would say, posing stiffly and somewhat robotically, with just a trace of protoplasm and humanity emerging from his eyes as he did his shtick in front of the mirror.

Aron's robot was imperfect, stumbled a lot, but he kept wandering back to the median and making some righteous choices. Robot 7's voice was slightly androgynous with a hint of HAL, though not quite that endearing or all-seeing. He looked past the obvious, made a few calculations, and spewed a data stream that was virtually eloquent. Aron saw himself as Heinlein and Asimov joined at the hip, with Vonnegut and Spielberg assuming the job of show runners. He knew he couldn't do the female voices so he let that drift out the window while he ran through his choices for narrator. Hanks definitely, maybe Tommy Lee Jones, Damon has his moments...

"Aron. AIR-RON."

"Yes, Ms. Olibagwei," said Aron, going all Eddie Haskell on the class.

"Any thoughts on Conrad's story?"

Aron knew this was the moment of truth. He'd tuned out the last two minutes of Conrad's reading—he'd already made up his mind once the first sentence was uttered—and kicked around the idea of saying, "I thought it was a thoughtful piece that evaluates the challenges—nay, the struggles—of the dedicated, underappreciated, perhaps even underpaid, complex, soulful, and, most interestingly, aberrantly sexual individuals that work so hard to elevate our understanding of, and ability to succeed in, life. Our teachers are..." and that's where he choked on his granola. He put his brain back on mind-sort, ran a few algorithms, and told it, well, with just a touch of Robot 7's panache.

“Conrad’s piece is well-written,” he said, “mostly coherent and consistent, but, uh—tell me if I’m missing something—but I think we just heard a guy jaggng off on his keyboard instead of into his sock.”

All the other writers stopped texting, emailing or surfing the web. Ms. Olibagwei stirred her tea.

“Well, thank you, Aron. That was certainly colorful.” Then she queried: “Any reactions to Aron’s crit?”

Four hands shot up.

“Donald.”

Donald’s last story had been about a depression-era diner a family had opened on Route 66, but if Aron thought about it, he remembered a ghost story and a little girl who’d disappeared behind a water-pump shed. Aron had trouble remembering his name so he’d dubbed this guy Donald Duck, or The Duck. Aron liked ghost stories and wished he knew how to write them.

“Aron’s being a little unfair here,” said The Duck. “I get it. Conrad’s story is boring and totally sucks, but his paragraph structure was textbook and it wasn’t without...well, you know.”

Well, no, we don’t know Mr. Duck, do we, thought Aron.

Ms. Olibagwei, cocked an eyebrow at Donald, let it pass, and said, “We appreciate your concerns, Donald, but if you were trying to inform the class of something relevant, I’m not sure what it was.”

Quack, thought Aron.

“Becky?”

“Aron is mean and derogatory and misogynistic, and I don’t like the way he smells and chews gum in class. I think personal hygiene counts and I don’t think it’s fair that Aron said my last story was a B+ at best.”

“Thank you, Becky,” said Ms. Olibagwei as she pushed a few strands of her dark hair across her forehead and curled them behind her ear. “That was very enlightening.”

“Ramon, any thoughts?”

Ramon was quite literally the dark horse of the class. He was an east L.A. poet and played saxophone in a Chicano band that gigged at backyard parties and quinceañeras. As a writer, Ramon was mostly ignored, but widely respected.

“Aron was down. My hommies sure as shit wouldn’t read that shit.”

Ms. Olibagwei scanned the room and called on the fourth hand that was still high above a writer’s head.

“Conrad?”

Conrad actually stood up and pointed an accusatory finger at Aron and said, “So what do you got, motherfucker? I’m puke, so what’re you?” Conrad grabbed his crotch and everyone thought he was going to say, “Eat me,” but he didn’t say anything so all the students sat back and figured a nibble would do.

A second became ten and then twenty, and then two writers began texting again and Ms. Olibagwei tapped her pen to a 4-5 beat. Aron knew the jig was up. First, he reread Conrad’s question through proper channels, turned it over in

his brain so Robot 7 could bake it on both sides, and then said the nicest thing he'd ever said in his life: "I got nothing."

Aron repacked his backpack, stuffing away his syllabus, mobile, and his unread story, and slowly made his way to the door in what he liked to think of as the robot shuffle. Just before leaving, he turned and gave Ms. Olibagwei a soft salute from his forehead—more of a goodbye than anything—and said in his best Wayne, "Well, I think that wraps it up, little lady." Cue the music, and he was gone.

Once out in the sunlight, Aron shielded his screen from the glare and checked his messages. Three of the five game developers were still hot about his Robot 7 story. One message was from his mother who was going to totally shit bricks when she heard he'd dropped out of another school. And two were from his bank, so he deleted them without a second thought. Aron let the sun soak into his arms, got a healthy vitamin D rush, and rechanneled his negativity into positive thoughts. Of course he'd made a fool of himself in front of Ms. Olibagwei and all of his fellow writers, but if all went well with the gamers, he still might have a shot at paying off his student loans.

From somewhere in the back of his brain Robot 7 said, "Joke 'em, if they can't take a fuck." Aron thought that was funny so he wrote it down. But then, Robert 7 was a robot, programmed to be the quintessential smart-aleck asshole of the galaxy, so Aron would have to take that into consideration, too.

