

A SHORT TWIST

Born as Roland Byron Reichman I became Roland Baron Brener. Reichman gave way to Brener when my mother remarried and wanted Jasper and me, her two sons, to have the same name as her own. Byron became Baron the first time I applied for a passport and, concerned that trouble would occur if I pointed out the clerical error, I accepted Baron.

One evening, at the age of seven, I said goodbye to our home on the coast . My mother packed us into a car and drove inland. Our father to be, aged thirty nine, left his mother and set out to meet us halfway and escort us to our new home. Approaching this midnight rendezvous he crashed and was seriously injured. We moved into our new house without him and he joined us when he was released from the hospital some months later.

My mother's new husband seemed a terrifying creature from another world. Occasionally Leo would read to me at bedtime and, if I closed my eyes, his voice became the empty roar of staved barrels careening towards me as I waited, trapped at the bottom. I invented escapes.

Once, at dusk, I knocked on the door of a friend and told his mother it was a matter of life or death, I must borrow his electric train set for the weekend. A man was threatening to kill pigeons in the park unless I followed his instructions and set up the train immediately. She laughed, then frowned, and I got the train set for one evening. Trained rats lived in the dark crawl-space under our house, I told a boy at school. We opened the cellar door and peering into the darkness he said he could hear them squealing when I called their names.

My desk was always centre front row. The teachers hoped to focus my attention though I could not see the blackboard. My older brother Jasper, who could understand me despite my early speech impediments, scoffed at the suggestion that I might have poor eyesight. I got my first pair of glasses at the age of thirteen and suddenly the world was full of sharp edges. My school performance did not improve. Embarrassed by spectacles I hardly ever wore them until my twenties. I failed to recognise people, was terrified of catching balls and had several accidents on motorcycles, the last resulting in severe concussion and double vision. The family doctor said not to bother calling him next time I fell on my head.

The Latin teacher would lean over my desk while speaking to the class. She placed her text book next to mine and, seeing a paper inserted in her's, I switched books. When I got home I found that I had stolen a copy of our final exam. It was passed around to other students and became soiled and grubby. During the next class I reinserted it into her book. She studied the book for some time in silence. In the frightening quiet I was told to stand and then stay after class. I was told to speak. I had taken her book by mistake and, when realising the significance of the paper it contained, had panicked and returned it without reading a word. She asked to see my hands and studied them at length. I had honest hands. *Thank you Ms...* I doubt you're still alive, but that was the best moment of my school experience. Despite her reproach that every word of the forthcoming exam would have to be rewritten, it remained unchanged. Many boys in the class scored perfect. I failed as I had neither copied the questions nor prepared the answers.

When school reports were due at home I waited anxiously for the postman to arrive. Tearing open the envelope I replaced the report with one of my own making, elevating my performance from last in class to the middle. The fabricated grades made me almost as proud as if I had earned them by honest work. My mother reluctantly accepted this shallow deceit. The question was asked- why did I open an envelope addressed to her- and there was silence. Preparing for the future, I created an illusion, and then willed both my mother and myself to believe it. Neither of us knew then that this was a preparation for the role of artist.

I failed all my subjects for the last time and dropped out of school. In one of the last classes I was described by my most feared teacher as someone who belonged at the bottom. The student who scored 34th to my 35th was berated: *With Brener here we understand, but with your intelligence you should be ashamed.*

An aptitude test followed. Questions like: *would you rather raise chickens or listen to long-playing records?* The psychologist to my mother: *He may be inclined towards language but doesn't have high skills; try him at printing.* Then an interview. Sitting in the outer office of the print works for several hours. By the time the boss calls me in I am catatonic from the din of printing machines. The boss to my mother: *He's just too slow for the trade.*

My first job would be in a tiny office as a filing clerk in a mining company, marking off items on cards from a thick pile of requisitions that arrived each morning. Inventory was

maintained on a Cardex filing system consisting of an entire wall of metal trays with cards that lay flat until pulled out. I soon discovered that by wedging a ruler horizontally into a Cardex file and dropping my Bic pen onto its partially recessed spring, it would jump the ruler. If the Bic succeeded, the ruler was raised to the next level of trays. My two co-workers were introduced to this office sport and became obsessed. Bics were taken home and customised, their springs doubled, their weight trimmed. In daily competition Bics almost touched the ceiling. Though never quite champion I was proud to have initiated a diversion that enthralled my fellow workers.

A year later, to escape conscription at home into the loathsome S.A. army, I volunteered into a foreign army and served two years as a paratrooper. But I was not a good soldier. The company commander called me to attention before three hundred men, " This pathetic scum is here to make an impression. Sure, the moment he's out he's going to say I was a paratrooper, yes, I volunteered, they needed me. Well, we know the truth don't we? This worm is nothing but a burden, a liability. We tolerate him because we don't want to cause an incident, you piece of shit. It's beneath me to punish something like you. Get out of my sight."

Despite the officer's pronouncement, I *was* punished. There was never freedom from persecution and never enough sleep. I dug holes up to my neck or lit fires on nearby hills, woke the sergeant to look, and then went back to put them out.

During my teens and early adulthood I was in trouble and punished for one thing or another. *It was still not clear that, through the elimination of other possibilities, I had been designated the role of artist and was performing a function in society. My virtues needed clarification and my skills the refinement that came slowly with time.*

THE ART OF GAMESMANSHIP

My first father owned a small seaside hotel, the Hotel Cecil. *My favourite hotel meal as a child: A large marrow bone on toast and butter. Spread the marrow as thick as the toast can support and eat at least two slices.* Manfred played cricket, owned a racehorse and, when terminally ill, played poker with friends sitting around his hospital bed. Were they allowed to smoke in the hospital? When he died at the age of thirty seven I was six

years old. On Manfred's death the ownership of the Hotel Cecil reverted to his mother. My mother, young and vital, soon married Leo and my brother and I were immediately disinherited.

At seventeen I worked as a dispatch clerk in the basement of a shoe company. I wanted a new motorcycle and decided to visit my grandmother and ask for money. A co-worker, an older man, impressed by stories of the wealth of my father's family, encouraged me. He helped me with a small gift of cash for the long journey to the coast and I promised him my old motorcycle should I succeed.

My grandmother, austere in black, was much smaller than I remembered when, ten years earlier, in her black boots - one with a six inch sole- and a crutch wedged under each arm, she stood regular guard at the kitchen entrance. Waiters, returning from the tables, were inspected and any butter left on plates scraped into a large bowl to be reused at the next meal.

She addressed me with formality. Once seated at a small table three cups of tea were served, the third cup for my deceased father. Though she asked several questions on my situation she seemed frail and ephemeral. My answers were cautious and vague since I knew I had achieved little.

Grandmother suggested a game of chess. Seated across the board her tiny presence was as terrifying as it had been when, as a small child, I had been invited to her room and had attempted to determine an appropriate stance. After several moves I wondered whether I should go all out in an attempt to impress her or whether I should go easy in the hope of pleasing her. This consideration became irrelevant when she surprised me by making two consecutive moves without a reply. Embarrassed and confused, I hesitated. She made a third consecutive move -- **CHECKMATE**.

No money, I thought.

On the long ride home my old motorcycle stalled on every hill in the mountains. I had ruined the engine through tinkering and then compounded the problem by pouring in disproportionate amounts of high-octane additive in a futile quest for speed. I had to inform my old co-worker that my mission had failed and we shared our disappointment.

Many years later, making art, I think of grandmother playing chess and the third cup of tea. I make a move and then move and then move again and there is never really a reply.

THE CIRCLE IS COMPLETE

The last time I saw my grandmother - again to ask for money - Uncle Carl opened the door and led me to a small back room. A hunchback, his swollen head pressed into his chest, locking them together so that he sidled sideways, pausing every few steps to swivel his bulging blue eyes towards the intended route. We arrived at a child's crib where my grandmother, hardly larger than an infant, lay in a fetal position. The only sign of life in an otherwise vegetable presence was the working of gums as she masticated on a lollipop. I stood with Carl and looked down at what I was aware was his mother.

Carl's new wife, Anne, entered. Under her heavy coat her whole frame shuddered each time she inhaled on her cigarette. "Mother just loves her lollipops" said Anne. The old lady eventually ejected a stick and Anne fished another from her pocket, twisted off the wrapper, and inserted in into the crumpled face.

Carl and his consumptive, alcoholic wife in their sparsely furnished penthouse. The view of the ocean through their plate-glass windows. The apartment block they owned. The city in which I was born. It was the last time I saw them.

Grandmother died shortly after my visit. Carl died years later of a heart attack, conflicting versions of her will clutched in his hands. Yet more conflicting copies were found in his penthouse safe along with statements recording the transfer of her assets to his own accounts. The courts threw out the mess, voided the wills and divided the estate among her living relatives. So Jasper and I, though disinherited, received some benefit from our late father.

I spent my inheritance within a month by commissioning the building of a beautiful classic mahogany yacht. The builder became a friend, and now, when he has the time, he builds sculptures for me in wood.

HOMING DEVICES

Imprints on the brain, neurotransmitters activating receptors in nerve cells, chemical messengers from one cell to another.

Flipping channels. A program on cats. Cats do something that only two other animals do, one is a giraffe and I missed the third: Cats walk with two left legs at once and then two right legs. I chase our cat off the carpet and it's true, two left and then two right. This helps in spotting prey though a scanning motion, *did they say that?* A cat gets in the wrong car and dropped off five hundred miles away, but still finds its way home. Perhaps it has a built in homing device, a magnetic sensor in the brain .

My nephew Adrian lived in a hole in his mother's garden for several years and didn't speak a word. Starving and filthy, he was captured by health workers and taken to a hospital where he was fed intravenously and given drugs. Almost at once he spoke. Through all the years of silence he had been in a secret place only he knows. At his most silent he had tied a hedgehog around his waist , spread eaged, with legs pulled in opposite directions. There were other small animals tied to the string - frogs, mice and suchlike. At night his mother would sneak into the garden and release the animals while he slept, but he would recapture them the next day and wear them till they died.

Years before his birth, Adrian's maternal grandfather lived in the same garden. A poet and minor clerk in the gas-works most his life, he had followed air-raid advice to leave the house during Blitzkriegs. After the war, however, he refused to move back inside, preferring his hole in the garden to the house he and his wife had built but never finished. It remained a house without any doors inside. He took long walks along the country roads and would collect any road kill , mostly hedgehogs. After cooking and eating the insides he would skin the hedgehogs so that the house by the river was full of stuffed hedgehogs. Aside from the hedgehogs, he cast dozens of concrete frogs of different sizes from moulds and they gathered outside.

The brain, where does it along belong?

Leo, driving towards Ida and her two children, to escort us to our new home, crashed into a parked truck in the dead of night. He was impaled on the steering wheel and was hospitalised for months with a cracked skull and smashed diaphragm. William was born to them, followed a year later by Zoe. After they entered university, they went on a holiday to the coast, in spite of Leo's strenuous objections, in their mother's car. On the return trip, they drove into the back of a broken-down truck and Zoe's thigh was fractured; tragically she died in hospital from inadequate diagnosis of her injury.

I asked Jasper, now a neuropsychologist, whether these events were evidence of a sort of homing instinct, information imprinted on the brain. He said quite definitely in the case of his son Adrian. But the tragedy of William and Zoe, he said, was just coincidence.

I have not been a good traveller. The places and moments of significance have been avoided. But sometimes, making art, I find instances and patterns others have missed. Uncalled phantoms appear.

Making things that move I wonder whether I grope for the sensation of sleep in a train carrying me towards the sea. Repetition echoes the rhythm of telegraph poles as they slip past the window. Wood, gleaming, recalls the varnished Mahogany and green leather of our little compartment. Sailing awakens thoughts of leaving home and the cabin of the boat is again the compartment of the train. I grew up in a *white* South Africa. All my heroes have been black: Paul Robeson, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Nina Simone and Muhammad Ali. A contrary culture, a cruel system, a torn family, a step father, all swirl and surface in the current of memory.