

I WAS A MUTANT STUDENT (The Lessons I Have Learned)¹

by Edward K. Brown II

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To the graduating class of two thousand and twenty, to the President, Provost and University Board, to the College of Arts and Humanities, and distinguished guests, to my colleagues and associates—and let me not forget my fellow assholes. I am glad to be here this evening to receive this honorary award which I have been bestowed. Before I commence with this ceremony, please excuse me while I sing the song of myself. Pardon me while I tell the tale of my artistic foundation—tell the story of how I became such a narcissistic moron.

One burly winter evening in Bucks County, Pennsylvania when I was just a baby, my father snatched me from my mother's breast. He was a strict Freudian and a very practical, scientific man. Dad bundled me in a blanket and carried me out of the house far, far away into the woods. He carried me past the woods into an open field.

A full moon's light filled the field. I remember seeing the stars: the Milky Way, the Big and Little Dippers. My father pointed to the North Star. Afterwards, he carefully laid me on the ground and unwrapped my bundling. He raised my naked body to the North Star and proclaimed, "Behold! The only thing greater than yourself! . . . GRAVITY!!!"

My father walked briskly away leaving me there in the snow startled, crying and wriggling. I remember this particular evening distinctly because it was then and there that I made my first snow angel. This was also the time when I realized my animal instincts. I gathered my blanket and tracked my father. My sense of direction was so keen that I figured out that my paternal guidance was heading in the wrong direction. I found my way back to the house before him. I pounded on the front door. My mother, the Naturalist that

she is, let me in and allowed me to finish my meal before my father returned. Ever since then my mother referred to me fondly, but privately as her nipping cherub.

My parents were bedazzled by my youthful maturity. They decided to insure my precocious instincts with a staunch education. They were concerned that I might one day put on Airs, so even before I went to school, my mother would not allow me to play with a basketball, or any ball for that matter. My parents were into corporeal education, yet they filled my mind with nothing but ideas. Every day I was assigned twenty vocabulary words. I was made to look up each word in the dictionary, write down the definition, then rewrite the word and the definition five times—each with a different sentence.

When I got into the first grade, my teacher sent my parents a letter stating that I should be placed in remedial classes. Infuriated, my parents questioned the teacher's credentials. In a meeting, the teacher stood firm with her declaration, "Your son, in comparison to the other students, is not able to keep pace. Yes, he speaks very well and has an accomplished vocabulary, but when I am conducting the lesson the students are able to absorb the material almost immediately. Your son is not like the others; he has to have things repeated to him—sometimes as much as five times! I do not understand your son's behavior, but that is the way it is."

Needless to say, I stayed in that teacher's class that year. My parents insisted on it. I stayed in that teacher's class the following four years repeatedly. The school insisted on it.

A family of five, I grew up in a modern, suburban household. I would not have guessed how typical my life was if I had not read it in a book. During the third recapitulation of social studies, I discovered that the average household, at the time, had 3.2 children. The 0.2 was usually a pet: a dog or a cat. The modern family, on average, owned two used or leased cars, or 1.5 new cars. Every family owned at least three televisions.

Reading this information made me feel very wholesome. I was living a very textbook

life. At the dinner table, my mother asked me what did I learn at school that day. I told her about how our family was statistically correct. I told her I was willing to accept the fact that I was average. My father busted my chops. Upset, I told him that if he was still hungry, he could at least have asked me if I was finished with my meal. My father warned me, "A hard head makes a soft butt. Besides, statistics are a lie." "En contraire mein Herr," I replied, "It is a hard but that makes the head soft. Besides, I heard that lie before." Then I showed him the statistics revealing how often and in what situations presidential candidates, in the heat of a campaign, utilize the line, "Statistics are a lie." My father stormed from the table. After I finished my dinner, my mother pulled me aside and instructed me not to be so cheeky.

My father was the official comedian of the family. My mother liked to attribute her husband's talents to her son. She would say, "Like father, like son." He would protest sternly, "Like father, hate son!!!" One day I told him that I felt estranged. He patted me on the shoulder and informed me in a nonchalant tone that I was just strange. My father smiled and sent me to my room to think about it.

After spending some time watching television in my room, I became bored. I began rummaging through some old magazines my parents left in my room. I came across an issue of the *New Yorker*. I believe it was the tenth of May, 1993 issue. There was a commentary. The title was, I believe, "Adoption Country." Anyhow, this commentary went on about the rude ambiguity of placing a child, willfully or carelessly, into the arms of a benevolent or malevolent Other. The article concluded by stating that America's nationhood was founded upon the metaphor of adoption; that through "[t]he vast migrations that populated this continent, the uprootings and replantings and recombining of people and peoples (sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in hope) that, for more than ties of biological kinship, created the American nation, can be seen as a historical experiment in mass geographical adoption. . . . And while we honor old ties, a substantial part of our very identity consists in the ability to transcend them with new ones—in the power that the heart has over the blood."

Even though I was not adopted, after reading this passage, I began to reflect on my life, my personal heritage and thought, "Yeah, I can dig it, but with, perhaps, a slight difference: instead of having to deal with mommy dearest, I have to deal with daddy dearest."

On probation for good behavior, my father allowed me to take an hour leave from the house, but if I was one minute late, he would send the dog after me. Not wanting to waste a second, I hastily walked up the street, listening to my single band, monophonic, two inch tweeter, transistor radio that had an earplug with a short. I put the radio together myself while in solitary confinement. My father bought it for my birthday. His intent was to introduce me to electronics. Even though I assembled the radio, it did not have good reception. I can still hear the air traffic controller and pilot transmissions that overrode the AM airwaves. "(kurrk) DC-12, DC-12. . . You are clear for a touchdown. (kurrk)." "Ah-firm-ah-tive tower. That's a Roger Staubach." Having the ability to receive such intimate transmissions, I affectionately named this wonder of wireless machinery R.S.R. (Radio Shack Radio).

The experience I had with my R.S.R. allowed me to build a sense of self confidence as well as a novice affinity for electronics, but I was not prepared for what I had suddenly come into contact: a FM multi-banded, digital, dolby surround sound, equalized stereophonic "box" with two belly blasting eight inch woofers. Confounded by this discovery, I realized that my life was a monochromatic joke.

The bully who owned the "box," took my R.S.R. from me and smashed it to pieces. He grabbed my by my throat and yelled, "You egghead punk! Make me laugh or suffer my wrath!" Flattered I asked this bulbous beauty why did the chicken cross the road? The bully released his grasp slightly and shrugged his shoulders. I proceeded with the answer to my hard-line questioning. "The chicken crossed the road in order to get the hell away from you!!!" The bully grinned and said, "Huh, that was pretty funny, but beating you up is a hell of a lot more entertaining. With that stated, he pummeled my face.

After several pummelings, I discovered that I was never going to fit in with my neighbors.

I informed my parents about the beatings I received daily and how they could go about obtaining a restraining order. Instead my parents sat me down and instructed me on character development. I did not understand what they meant. They clarified themselves by explaining that they would rather have the bullies beat me, rather than me beating myself.

They were correct. Having someone beat me did add to my character. I gained a new perspective, a new point of reference. I began to see myself as being marginal in an already marginalized community, but still living a status quo, modern, mainstream life. Ironically, I was not really a part of mainstream life. Theoretically, I was a part of something I was not historically supposed to be, yet I was not traditionally a part of something I was not technically supposed to be. My life became a paradox which permitted me to understand the nuances between theory and tradition. This paradoxical perspective which was not shared by many, or even a few, relieved me of my contempt for the Others. The consequence, regardless of my feelings, was that socializing became very difficult.

Throughout middle and high school I was given hell for not being a YYYEEEAHHH BBBOIOIOIYYYYEE. I was chastised for not having a rap about being deprived, for not being dissed by "society," despised for not participating in africentrifugation: the willingness to segregate one's self from the "central culture." I was an outcast because I did not exploit my race, because I did not exploit racism.

Strange enough—I could not get out of my mind that this is a democracy, and this is a capitalist society. So, exploiting one's racial background, i.e. identity, is permissible, and should be permissible if America wishes to remain a free and open society—especially if people are going to buy it. Besides, every profitable, racial identity needs financial backing because it provides a psychological legitimacy which provides the consumer with a sense of belonging. It's true. What do you call an identity without financial backing? . . . Spineless. What I could not understand, what I tried to understand is how could anyone allow themselves to be psychologically enslaved?

Even with my ability to figure out how democratic, capitalist exploitation operated on a theoretical and traditional level, even though I thought it to be somewhat insidious, I forced myself to believe that I should restrain myself from my suburban identity, that I should be more discrete with my paradoxical identity, my humor, my senses since they were not intrinsically inherent to the urban, consumer diaspora. I thought I should not stand up for my personal beliefs, but stand up for the beliefs of those whose spending habits were in the majority because my personality was modern-American, not traditional-American: because my personality did not match the color of my skin; because I am unlike, statistically unlike the others of color—on the brink of destruction.

Needless to say, I became lost in the thoughts of Others—as it should be in college. As a result of my thinking, or my Other thinking, I kept to myself and sank into my own private abyss. My life had finally been superbly ruined.

During this depression I discovered that my situation was due to being first generation P. C.R.M. (Post-Civil Rights Movement). The verbal abuse directed towards me was due to the fact that my identity did not have history's traditional problems lodged in my psyche. My parents did not propagandize me in that way, so my mind was relieved of such problems. With my psyche relieved, I had no desire to engage myself wholeheartedly with any generations' previous problems—any political fallout. However, I was well aware that these problems existed.

After college I was aware of these dilemmas, but not engaged in any of them. I saw American culture, all of America's various cultures suffering from their inherent histories. I considered myself fortunate that I was ahistorical, that I inherited nothing from the past. I had the opportunity to pick and choose. Thus I saw my life as being very independent. The drawback was that I had an experience unlike anyone else. Life becomes very difficult when you cannot communicate to people because they have no idea what your "historical" experience is.

I searched desperately for a means, for terms to share my experience. The search was frustrating because of my situation. Being marginalized in a marginal community brings one full circle; you are always chasing after and running from your shadow. I tried to use modern lingo since that was what I was most familiar. The best modern term that fit my situation, at the time, was the word "pathetic." However, not too many people want to talk to a pathetic person. Picture it. Would you talk to someone who walked up to you and said, "My life is so pathetic. Would you talk to me please?" I would be lucky if someone told me to get lost. So, reluctantly, I tried postmodern lingo. The best pomo-term, pomo-phrase, that fit my situation at the time was "African-American twice removed." Even with this contemporary phraseology, I was not comfortable discussing my situation. I feared that I might become the latest mutant on the talk show, carnival circuit. I decided to discard the pomo-phrase because I thought that it would eventually prove to be too rigid.

I continued my search for terms that were flexible enough to evoke the ideas I needed to communicate with people, but not so rigid that I would become pigeonholed. This meant I could not concern myself with either mainstream trends or marginal issues. This meant I could not place modernism over postmodernism; the Euro-centric over the Afro-centric; nor concern myself with the imbalances of gender be it homo- or hetero-centric; not with the techno- or eco-centric; nor versa vice.

I found I could only concern myself, one hundred percent, with the eccentric. The reason being the eccentric's impartiality, their disinterest in problems other than being human; their concern with the spirit. Let there be no misinterpretation here. I am not talking about some mysterious Other. I am talking about the survival of sensibility. Sensibility is the spirit. The eccentric is concerned only about making sense if only to the self. It was in the eccentric that I found myself—in Art, in the creation of art.

Make no mistake. I am not wallowing in my own self pity. I have come to terms with myself, and I am able to deal with my shapeless past. It may appear to you that I am not all

there, and I will admit that I am not all here. I have taken a step beyond my physicality and my ethnicity. I have trekked onward to my personal being. I have taken the step beyond the twenty-first century. That is why I am able to accept this award on my behalf even though a part of me is not present. Aloof, yes. Lost, no.

As I place myself on a limb with the wind gusting in my face, I will only need to remember to keep myself centered and go with the flow. I have sorted my life and will move onward face the new challenges the future has to offer. My only regret is that the best I can offer you is some advice if you are willing to accept it—and that would be give yourself some good advice.

I thank you for this honor. I accept my award as I accept this life—with one apprehension. That is, when I die, and at this point in time it is a bit early for me to be worried about death, but if I were to suddenly pass away, just before the life has left me, I would instantly become nostalgic for my past. My apprehension is that in my lust for my past life, I would be reincarnated instantly and would have to repeat myself.

In conclusion I say to the class of 2020, as my sight becomes worse with age, I will have to rely on your perfect vision. So as you go out into the world and try to create some sensibility for yourself, be careful. Keep your eyes focussed, and keep your mind clear.

PERFORMANCES

April 28 - 29, 1994

The Spirits in the Dark: Festival of Performance; Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia (two shows).

April 27, 1994

Rittenhouse Recital Series; the Ethical Society, Philadelphia (preview).

January 16, 1994

The Field's 90 Plays in 90 Days; UBU Repertory Theatre, New York.

¹ While this play is inspired by my experiences in New York City, Texas and Philadelphia, PA, all characters represented are fictional. Any character's likeness of living or dead persons is merely coincidental.