

Young Writers Award - 2008 Winner

The Life of Brian (or lack thereof) by Maree Spratt

Define the colour red without using the words 'colour' or 'red' in your answer, and without making reference to any other colours.

Well, Brian thinks, that's obvious.

It's almost too obvious. The question was posted five hours ago, giving his nemesis from the Northern Hemisphere ample time to submit the right answer. Chances are that while Brian slept in his Brisbane flat, SpaceMouse23 sat hunch backed and hungry-eyed at a computer in Washington, furiously typing his way towards a top answer and ten bonus points. Brian cannot stand SpaceMouse23. Ever since he became a top contributor on *Yahoo Answers* he has written all his responses in pretentious prose. 'Somewhat', 'rather' and 'one may presume' adorn every sentence. He thinks he's the anti-noob. He's not. He's a slightly smart kid lucky enough to live in the Pacific Time Zone. Brian would have been crowned King of *Yahoo Answers* by now if he wasn't asleep when the website received the most traffic.

Although the odds are stacked against him, Brian decides that anything is worth a shot. He cracks his knuckles and clicks on the link.

'Consider fire engines, roses and anger boiling underneath your skin.' – SpaceMouse23

Laughter hits Brian hard in the stomach. He can't believe it. That answer has to be at least ten different shades of lame. His mouth shifts into a grin as he types what he knows is a perfect response.

'Electromagnetic radiation that has a wavelength of approximately 650 to 750 nanometers' –
BrianCranley01

You can't argue with that. That is what red *is*. Brian clicks 'submit' triumphantly. A feeling of buoyancy created by an expanding sense of self worth carries him through the rest of his morning routine. He has a feeling that today will be a good day. It has to be. He's already achieved something and it's only 7 am.

He's already achieved something and Richard still hasn't dragged himself out of bed. Brian wonders whether he should set his alarm clock for 9.30 and plant it in Richard's bedroom. Someone needs to save him from sleeping through the whole day. Would that be too intrusive, though? Is it socially acceptable to be so involved in your flat mate's life that you want to control how many hours of consciousness he experiences per day? In most circumstances the answer would be no, it is not acceptable, but Richard has to be an exception. He has a tattoo of an analogue watch inked onto his left wrist. It doesn't have any hands. When you ask him what the time is he shoves it in your face and says, 'whatever you want it to be.' Richard needs all the help he can get.

Brian stands outside Richard's room and falters. The alarm clock's face feels cold against his palm. He grips the door knob tighter than he has to. The thought of stepping into Richard's bedroom always makes him nervous. His door is like the oval shaped window on Play School; you cannot possibly guess what crazy shit is lurking on the other side. The only difference is that it's generally not G-rated. Brian opens the door and exhales. Richard lies on the bed with his long brown hair fanned out across his pillow. There are no girls, no bongs and no remnants of satanic rituals. It stinks, though. The smell of semen and cigarette smoke creates a stale odour best described as 'au de dirty human.' Brian crinkles his nose and places the alarm clock on top of the chest of drawers. A line of black ants are disappearing into the closed top drawer. He'd open it and find out why, but he doesn't think he can handle two suspenseful revelations before breakfast.

There are a lot of things that Brian can't handle. A full City Express bus is one example. Rather than claim his usual seat (fourth row, driver's side) he has to wade through an awkward sea of fleshy humanity to the back row. He finds himself jammed between an obese female Goth dressed up like a charred Christmas tree and a fifteen year old boy in a private school uniform. Brian opens his copy of Moby Dick and tries to pretend that his right leg is not being warmed by the Goth's gelatinous thigh. He is beginning to enjoy a paragraph about fishing knots when a knee knocks into his. He looks up. The school boy is clutching the waist of a girl; tightly, as a rock climber with a lost pick might cling to a ledge. The air grows hot with heavy breathing and sharp whispering. Brian's ears start to burn. He stares intently at the page in front of him but the black markings are in a language he doesn't understand and all he can hear is the rhythmic sound of kissing. He becomes suddenly aware of his tongue. Saliva builds inside his mouth. He forces himself to swallow it. Brian has never been this close to passion. He has watched it on TV, but film fails to illustrate how intrusively warm it is. The teenagers generate a heat that quickens his pulse. It brings his mind to a stand still. It's too much. He has to move.

Brian finds a place to stand near the back door. He begins to count in multiples of six. The higher he counts, the harder he concentrates; the slower his heart beats and the cooler his head feels. When he reaches 444 his mind returns to a state of clarity. He feels like a breathless swimmer who has crawled to the surface of the ocean and plunged, exhausted, into stripped daylight.

'PDAs should be illegal, don't you think?'

If it weren't for the fact that members of the general public never talk to Brian, he might have thought this statement was directed at him. The voice is decidedly female. This is all the more reason why she cannot be talking to him. It has been five years since a girl has engaged Brian in conversation. On occasion he has indulged in harmless flirtation with Sarah26 from *Yahoo Answers*, but he knows that doesn't count.

'Hey. I'm talking to you.'

No, Brian thinks, you are not. He stares straight ahead and refuses to blink. The owner of the voice punches his bicep. Fear shoots through his body and settles in the pit of his stomach. This can't be happening. She has atrocious eye hand coordination and meant to punch someone else. Brian turns his head away from her. A business man is staring at him. His face bears the hesitant, sympathetic expression of an actor who is watching his colleague flounder upon the stage. Who is Brian kidding? She is talking to him, and he is going to have to take back. He relaxes his facial features into an expression that he hopes conveys cool detachment and turns to face her.

Her hair is dark and her features are small. She is almost attractive.

'I was just saying' she says, 'that I think PDAs should be illegal.'

'What are PDAs?'

'Public Displays of Affection. Refer to exhibit A at 12 O'clock.'

She nods in the direction of the kissing teenagers.

'Oh,' Brian says, 'OK.'

That's all he can think to say. OK. He wants to kick himself. This is a conversation, a human interaction, not a dialogue box on a computer. He pretends to yawn. It's what he always does when he can't think of anything meaningful to contribute to a conversation. It's a gesture that is meant to say - 'Hey, I'm not always this boring, I'm just really tired today!' Most of his friends and colleagues suspect he is an insomniac.

'That was the most glaringly obvious pseudo-yawn I have seen in my life.'

'It wasn't a pseudo-yawn.'

'I'm sorry, but it was.'

'I'm tired today, alright?'

The girl begins to sniff. She performs the prelude to a sneeze with the gusto of a seasoned opera singer; *ah, ah, ah*....she tosses her head back and shouts *choooooo* so loudly that five people turn and look. A middle aged passenger unplugs one of her earphones and glares at her. The girl turns to Brian and whispers,

'I have a cold today, alright?'

'Alright,' Brian says, scanning the bus for another place to stand. There isn't one.

The girl's eyes dart back to the kissing teenagers.

'How old do you think she is?'

Brian shrugs - 'thirteen, maybe.'

'That's what I was thinking. She could even be twelve. She's definitely in year eight. For all we know, she might not have even had her period yet.'

Never before have Brian's ears exhibited this much inflammation in one day.

'Surely,' she says 'parliament can pass a law preventing twelve year old girls from squandering their innocence before their periods start.'

It is at this point that something remarkable happens. Brian thinks of a witty thing to say. One might even call it a joke. It sits and shimmers in his conscious mind like a two dollar coin resting in the sand. He dives at it.

'The *No Dating Before Menstruating Act of 2008*'

The moment the words fall from his lips he wishes he could cram them back into his mouth. He's fairly sure that discussing menstruation with strange girls on buses isn't socially acceptable behaviour. His ears are at risk of spontaneously combusting.

She laughs. She has a loud, machine gun cackle that makes you want to hit the ground in case she tilts her head in your direction. Brian's face cracks into a smile. Amusing her feels like an even greater achievement than owning SpaceMouse23.

She's gone after that. She gets off the bus at Mater Hill and waves at him from the platform. She looks pretty, standing there. Here is an interesting phenomenon; those who are almost attractive when we first meet them are thoroughly beautiful once we've made them laugh.

Brian is not the same for the rest of the day. As he walks through Queen Street he looks at people's faces instead of staring at the pavement. He puts fifty cents in a street performer's hat instead of fuming about how much he hates show offs. Brian usually spends his Physics tutorials watching other students put forward wrong answers and silently basking in a sense of superiority. Today he correctly answers two questions. He catches his reflection in glass doors and windows, and instead of feeling apathetic about his appearance, he longs to be attractive. Presently he is curious looking. Colonies of pimples set up camp across his jaw when he was fifteen. They have remained there ever since despite countless eviction notices. At age twenty his brown hair is already going grey at the fringe. Old age and puberty have marked out their territory and are poised to fight a war across his face.

When Brian gets home, Richard is sitting at the kitchen table, still in his pyjamas. Brian walks through the hallway and peers into his flat mate's bedroom. Fragments of his alarm clock are scattered across the floor. There is a dent in the wall. Normally he'd be angry, but today he couldn't care less. He re-enters the kitchen and awaits conversation. Brian can be surprisingly talkative in the comfort of his own home and in the company of people he feels quietly superior to. Richard is staring at a silver fork that lies flat on the table before him. He flicks its prongs and watches it spin in a circle.

'I had a dream that I was mind controlling cutlery.'

'Impressive.'

'I thought so too. I was sitting on the sand at the beach and ten forks were hovering in a circle before me. They were hovering *because* of me. If I stared at an individual fork hard enough it would twirl around like an ice skater. A crowd of people gathered to watch, and I don't want to sound arrogant, but I was the coolest person they'd ever seen.'

Brian eyes the fork on the table.

'So now you're trying to recreate the scenario with two new variables; gravity and reality. Good luck with that.'

'No, that's not it.' Richard says. He punches the spinning fork and it slides across the table. 'I'm just trying to work out what it all means.'

'It probably doesn't mean anything.'

'Christ Brian. You need to get an interior life already. Of course it means something. Dreams bring repressed desires and emotions into our field of consciousness. You can look it up on Wikipedia if you don't believe me.'

'Oh, right. If you have a repressed desire to take control of the cutlery in your life, I think you should definitely act upon it. You can wash and dry the dishes tonight.'

'Piss off, that's your job.'

'Actually,' Brian says, pointing to a crinkled chart stuck to the refrigerator, 'it is not my job. It just became my job two years ago because you always failed to do it.'

'What do you dream about anyway?' Richard asks, 'chemical reactions?'

Richard is very good at pretending not to hear whole sentences.

'I dream about normal things,' Brian says, 'missing the bus, appearing naked in public, screwing up exams. I dreamt a few nights ago that I got a four on the mid-semester. I don't feel impressive in my dreams, just ashamed and anxious.'

'Your dreams sound a lot like my reality.'

'Does that include the appearing naked in public part?'

'Not that part. I'm usually too drunk to feel ashamed when that happens.'

That night Brian dreams about the girl. He dreams that they are sitting on his veranda watching the sun set. She says it's the most beautiful sunset she's ever seen. He says that the vibrant red and orange hues are caused by the scattering of sunlight off dust particles, soot particles and other solid aerosols floating in the earth's atmosphere. She is so impressed that she kisses him. When he wakes up he has to change the sheets. At 6.45 am he logs onto *Yahoo Answers* to ask a question rather than answer one. You lose five points when you ask a question (it's an outright admission of noobness), but he doesn't care anymore.

'What are the symptoms of being in love?' –BrianCranley01

The bus that morning is almost empty. Brian's eyes scan across the other passenger's faces as he walks down the centre aisle. The girl sits up the back. There is an empty seat beside her. For a second they make eye contact. His stomach lurches. She raises a hand to wave at him and he tears his eyes away. He can't be funny a second time. He just can't. She probably doesn't remember him anyway. Chances are she's waving to someone else or swatting away a fly or reaching to press the bell. Brian pretends not to see her and takes a seat in the fourth row on the driver's side. It's where he always sits.