



SLQ Young Writers Award 2014 – Winner

Zen Master

by Michael Day

'I reckon everyone should have to work in hospitality for a few years. You know like, how in Israel you have to do time in the army? Three years for men. Two for women,' says Paulo.

The Burrito Bar was the go-to-break-place. It wasn't as busy as usual tonight, so we have time to enjoy our post-burrito ciggies on the steps outside the cinema. The dessert café where we work is pretty empty tonight too. I think about asking why men do an extra year of army service, but I just nod and look down at my uniform. It's patterned with flour and chocolate stains, and my apron is tucked into the front of an old pair of skinny jeans that were once black but are now faded grey. My skin is being really shitty today and I feel like everyone is staring at me. I imagine getting arrested for having bad skin.

Paulo continues, 'You know like, there are some real fucking assholes who come in and treat waiters like fucking servants, you know what I mean?'

'Yeah man, it's fucked,' I say.

'You got a girlfriend, bro?'

'Nope.'

I think about the picture on my phone of a girl I used to see. She is standing in her bedroom wearing lime green underwear. Her index finger is in her mouth. You can see her tongue. I imagine her appearing down the street and try to imagine her coming over to me...

'Man, after close I'm going to go meet my girl in the Valley. It's going to be so dope,' says Paulo, squishing his cigarette on the edge of a metal bin.

I check my phone. We have about two minutes to walk a block and a half. I write a tweet about having bad skin and finish off my energy drink. It tastes terrible but I'm working until close.

'We better hurry,' I say.

'Yeah man, it's fucked,' he says.

I remember the interview for this job was in a hotel lobby because the store was still under construction. There was a lady there with colourful tattoos of birds on her forearms. She worked for the head office of this chain of dessert cafés and asked about my barista experience. I told her I had about two years experience when really I had less than one. At the time having a job seemed something like a solution, but after a few weeks at the café I found my name on the roster board under ‘Dishes’ more and more often. I relished any time I got to go on the floor to wait tables. It felt like a relief, going out to make shitty conversation with shitty people. The boss would pop his head in to the kitchen.

‘Mate, I need you on the floor.’

And I would wipe my sweaty forehead with the back of my sweaty hand.

‘Okay.’

‘Mate, don’t forget to smile out there.’

‘Yep. Okay.’

It’s a weeknight and Paulo and I are working together in the back of the kitchen. After working the dishes for a few hours my hands are raw. I’m piling plates and sorting cutlery. I’m stacking glasses, being gentle because they are hot, just out of the machine, and sometimes they shatter. I am hoping my car doesn’t have a ticket. My phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s Scott. I should’ve put my phone in the locker.

hey man! havin ppl over tonight! u busy?

working til close! sorry man :(

The big silver dishwashing machine beeps. It is my R2-D2. Paulo is drying cutlery while he tells me about some club or something. He could be my C-3PO I think. I can’t really hear him over the sound of the machine. My therapist told me that breathing is important for dealing with anxiety so I take a deep breath, in and out. I am meditating. I am the Zen master. I am silently praying the boss will come in and tell me to get out on the floor and smile. The boss’s daughter floats into the kitchen, sighing and looking serious. She is a shift manager and I think she must only be about seventeen. Her long, dark, wavy hair is confined in a bun.

‘Hey, do you mind if you go home?’ she says, ‘we really don’t need this many people on when it’s this quiet.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ I say.

I look at Paulo and feel a little guilty for leaving a man behind, but mostly I’m glad to not have to close and carry the tables and chairs in from the street.

‘You got this, Paulo?’ she asks.

He nods and I'm trying not to look relieved as I retrieve my bag and my jacket and take off my apron and nametag. I text Scott as I walk through the park to my car.

hey dude got off early omw

ye sik 1 bring beers!

I reach my car and there is no ticket. I think about how Scott has lots of parties because his parents are 'super chill'. Sometimes his mum will stay up late and arrive on the back deck. I imagine her coming through the doorway like in a sitcom, pausing for the crowd's applause before beginning her dialogue.

'Would anybody like a cheese toastie? Or a hot chocolate?'

'Oh my god, Scott! Your mum is the best.'

'Yeah dude, your mum is so hot.'

'Yeah, she is a fucking babe hey.'

'Shut the fuck up!'

I arrive at Scott's with two six-packs and can hear the music from out on the street. I put on a black t-shirt in the car. It's too dark to see myself in the rear-view so I run my fingers along my face. My skin feels rough and I smell of flour and sugar. I roll a ciggie in the car before I walk down the side of the house and up the stairs to the back deck. The usual suspects are all sitting around the table and they're all dressed pretty nice. They'll probably be going out later. I give Scott a hug, shake some hands, and pull up a seat at the corner of the table. The deck windows look into the kitchen and I can see Ashleigh and Olivia.

'What's going on in there?' I ask my friend Nick.

'Who fucking knows hey,' he says, shrugging.

A conversation starts about 'nice guys' versus 'treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen'. I resist the urge to take out my phone and scroll through Facebook.

'I reckon the 'treat 'em mean thing' only works for superficial encounters, and like if you're sweet to a chick then you can like, transcend all those other motherfuckers.'

'I like nice guys!'

'That's bullshit.'

'But what if a superficial encounter becomes something more meaningful?'

'I think every time I've dated a guy, it's started as just like a hook up.'

Laughter.

'Fuck off.'

A couple sitting at the other end of the table remain tactfully silent. They're holding hands. I'm laughing when Ashleigh touches my shoulder.

'Hey, can you come into the kitchen? Liv needs to talk to you.'

I am annoyed but not surprised that Liv doesn't come outside herself, so I get up and follow Ashleigh into the kitchen. Some of the group is singing 'I Want It That Way' by the Backstreet Boys.

Olivia is sitting on the floor in the kitchen, her legs outstretched. She has a phone to her cheek and a hand to her forehead. Ashleigh kneels next to her.

'He's here,'

'Hey Liv.'

She looks up at me. Her makeup is smudged and she is red in the face. She offers me the phone.

'You need to talk to her,' she says.

'I don't want to talk to her,' I say.

Her is my ex-girlfriend. Her is Amy. I have a photo of Amy on my phone in lime green underwear. Amy is dating some handsome, beardy guy or something.

'She's locked herself in a bathroom – I don't fucking know where. She's... I don't know what to do.'

I take the phone.

'She listens to you.'

I put the phone to my ear and I can hear sobbing.

'Hey, it's me.'

'Where's Liv?' says Amy.

'She gave me the phone. What's going on?'

There is a long pause.

'Amy, what's going on?'

She sniffs a little.

'I just... I don't want to be here anymore.'

'Where? Brisbane?'

'No, I don't want to be anywhere.'

Part of me wishes my boss's daughter hadn't let me off work early. Part of me is angry and scared and wants to just hang up. Part of me is remembering the ladder of thin white lines up her arms. I close my eyes. I am meditating. I am the Zen master. I take a deep breath.

'Where are you?' I say.

There's a pause.

'I'm at a party,' she says.

Ash and Liv are staring at me.

'Where's... your boyfriend?'

'He's outside. It's his party. Everyone's fucked.'

I take a sip of beer.

'You have to go home, okay?'

Crying.

'Amy, you have to call your mum and get her to come get you. She will be worried about you,' I say.

Softer crying.

'You have to promise me that when I hang up the phone you will call her, okay?'

'Okay... I promise.'

I can hear the sound of someone banging on the bathroom door through the phone.

'I'm fine. I'm coming out,' Amy says to someone on the other end.

I imagine her in a party dress on the floor of a bathroom.

'Amy?'

'Yes?'

'If you need to talk to me again, call me on my phone.'

'I deleted your number.'

She makes a sound almost like a laugh and I smile a little. I think about the photo of her in the lime green underwear. Index finger. Tongue.

'I'll send it to you.'

'Thank you.'

Now I'm sitting on the floor, across from Liv. Our feet are almost touching. Ashleigh has returned to the deck.

'Are you sure she'll be alright?' says Liv.

I show her a text on my phone.

In the car with mum now. x

Liv smiles.

'That sucked,' I say.

'That fucking sucked,' she says.

We smile at each other and she touches my foot with her foot. Liv and Amy have known each other since primary school. Scott sits down next to us.

'What are these motherfuckers doing on my kitchen floor?'

'Where's your mum, Scott?' says Liv.

'My parents are away. They're in LA.'

Liv makes a sad face at Scott and then a wide-eyed face at me.

'Hey, let's go somewhere!'

I'm peeling the paper off my beer bottle. She is miming smoking a joint.

'Okay,' I say.

I am in my car with Liv up the street from Scott's house. We've put the front seats back and are staring at the ceiling. The music is too loud but in a good way. Liv has her feet up on the dashboard.

'Put on something chill after this. Like suuuper chill,' she says.

She is wearing my sunglasses. It's maybe 1am. I go to change the song on my phone but I accidentally touch the photos icon. My thumb touches the photo of Amy.

'Woah, why do you have that?' says Liv.

She is sitting up now. My glasses are resting on her forehead. I look down at Amy.

Index finger. Tongue.

'I just never deleted it I guess. Is that sad?'

Liv takes the phone and starts laughing.

'Isn't this illegal?' she says, handing me the phone.

'What do you mean?'

'Look at her hair, you must've both been seventeen when this was taken and now you are technically a grown man with a picture of a naked underage girl.'

'Half-naked.'

'Whatever, man, you should probably delete that.'

'Yeah, I know.'

The windows of my car are all fogged up.

'We should probably get back,' I say.

'I don't want to.'

She's looking at me. I'm trying to imagine what she's thinking. I try not to think about kissing her. Her lips are opening a little and I can see the saliva on her tongue glistening in the dark. She puts her index finger in her mouth and then starts laughing. I'm laughing too. We're both laughing. She kisses me on the cheek and we get out of the car.

I am at work, feeling pretty scattered, washing dishes. This time I am alone with R2-D2. It's busy. The dishes keep coming. We're at war. The wait-staff place piles of dishes all around me. A tower of milkshake glasses teeters precariously.

'Jeez, it's pretty hot in here. Are you okay?' says a waitress, as she places a tray piled with little silver teapots on the counter.

'I am the Zen master,' I say.

I hear her giggle from behind me. She is Canadian and told me once that she thinks Brisbane is the most beautiful place on Earth.

'This hasn't been touched I swear,' she says.

'What?'

She puts some choc-fudge cake in my mouth. It's warm and good. I turn and smile at her as she takes a sip out of a half-drunk strawberry milkshake.

'Gross,' I say, making a face.

'It's pretty good. You want some?' she says.

I imagine what it would be like to have a photo of her in her underwear on my phone. She raises her eyebrow and I shake my head.

'Suit yourself. Back to the trenches,' she says.

'Good luck, soldier,' I say.

On my break I'm not that hungry so I get an iced coffee from the convenience store across the road and have enough time to chain-smoke three ciggies. 'Off-the-chain smoking,' I think, wondering whether it's Twitter-worthy. I check my phone. Liv texted me to ask whether I want my sunglasses back and there's a photo attached of her with her finger in her mouth wearing my sunglasses. There is also a missed call and a voicemail from Amy. I check the voicemail.

'Hey... um... thanks for last night... I'm sorry... I'm sorry, yeah. Okay. Thanks. Bye.'

I feel a bit sick. Maybe I should eat a burrito. I scroll through the photos on my phone and arrive at Amy and I imagine throwing my phone into traffic – a car hits my phone and it explodes and the people outside the cinema are screaming. I take a deep breath and hit delete. I close my eyes. I am meditating. I am the Zen master.