

## Right and Left Brain

### Right Brain: A Story

Rosemarie Bruno, gray-haired and portly, stood in the vestibule to Sacred Heart Church telling any parishioner who stayed after the Saturday evening Mass that God must be a very healthy man, a fruit eater in fact, for He had given all His earthly children a fruit-shape. She said that her God-given body shape was that of a pear and then she wiggled her large hips as if to communicate her pride in them. Her thin husband, Bernard, in the shape Rosemarie had told him was a stringbean, incessantly dipped his hands in the holy water and wiped them across his forehead trying to stay cool during the August heat wave. He sighed to himself. Stringbeans were not a fruit.

Rosemarie was oblivious to the error, just as she was oblivious in June on her former informative crusade: God must be a math professor because everyone's face had a geometrical equivalent. Bernard's long, drawn face became ovular but she pronounced it "oh-vu-ler" and believed God had given her a face in the shape of a heart. Bernard was weary to correct her. Circles, rectangles, trapezoids, rhombuses, yes, yes, any polygon was a geometrical shape, but a heart, God no. Not in any textbook he'd ever seen. What a load of crap.

Yet despite his weariness, he had told her, in so many words, that faces as shapes was indeed a load of crap. It didn't go over very well. Rosemarie cried a torrent, oozed enough tears to fill the bird-bath stands of holy water Bernard was slowly draining in cupped hands. She threw herself on her knees in their small one-story home and prayed as her eyes flooded onto the carpet. Rosemarie urged God to give her a sign if she was, in her own small, self-sacrificing way, doing His great bidding by spreading these words. Later that night it rained nonstop, the June air heavy with humidity, as if God himself were crying with Rosemarie and sharing her pain. At least that is what she told Bernard. In the morning, due to gusts of wind throughout the night, sticks, leaves, and refuse had blown into a heart on their front lawn.

It became a serious point of contention between them. It was her opinion against his because Bernard didn't see a heart – it wasn't symmetrical, the humps were uneven, and it was rounded at the bottom, not a sharp definitive point. If God wanted to make a heart, He could make a heart. Plus, Bernard consoled himself, it was supposed to rain

anyway.

Standing in the vestibule now, listening to his wife's idle chatter, Bernard was sure that the world could not be reduced to shapes. Life was much too complicated for that. Bananas and apples, triangles and ellipses did not explain why their daughter, Mary Jo, was a lesbian, they did not bring his twin brother back from Arlington Cemetery, and they did not help bolster his failing faith.

"I think I should be a priest," Rosemarie said later as they slowly walked home from the church.

The walk was only five blocks along 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue. At one time, Bernard could have named all the families in every house along those five blocks. They were people his parents knew, or he went to school with, or who Mary Jo sold Girl Scout cookies to. He'd seen them all at Sacred Heart on Saturday evenings years ago when Rosemarie used to keep her silly mouth shut. Bernard couldn't remember exactly what had caused her to become so outspoken, this new tendency to think of something foolish and then spout it loudly in the vestibule of the church to other fools who would actually listen to her. All he could recall was a rush from their bathroom, a stretched, shocked look about her face, and her mumbling something about "a moment of grace."

"That's a good idea," Bernard said, knowing Rosemarie as a priest was the true definition of blasphemy. He didn't make eye contact with his wife. That was an invitation for her to keep on talking so he lowered his eyes and focused on the mason's stamp in every other sidewalk square.

But what had been her enlightenment became his as well. In the opposite way however. Her oversimplifications of the world caused him to look at his relationships in a new light. It helped him open up more to Mary Jo, doing his best efforts during weekly lunches, a secret to Rosemarie, to close the gap in their estranged relationship. When Mary Jo came out to them a few years ago, he was not proud of his reaction: shouting, swearing, a fine dinner plate, flung across the dining table, breaking, mystically enough, into three distinct pieces: The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost. Rosemarie had fully agreed with him and – yes, yes, Bernard smiled to the concrete. It was a few days after Mary Jo came out that Rosemarie had her moment of grace, rushing from the toilet, from what Bernard joked to himself as a momentous bowel movement. What else could have

caused it? He figured she was constipated again and passed out from holding her breath, trying to evacuate something too large for her intestines, having a vision of God in a brown turd. The beginning of the world as shapes Bernard had commented.

“But it's a man's world,” Rosemarie lamented.

Another God-inspired summation by Rosemarie, thought Bernard. It was what had bonded him to Mary Jo since their tenuous reunion. At first, he only used Rosemarie in comparison to himself to let Mary Jo know that he was thinking differently, the world was changing and it did no good to anybody to hold onto antiquated belief systems. But, through no conscious intention on his part, each lunch quickly turned into a cruel synopsis of Rosemarie's juvenile thoughts and actions, then finished with a hearty scoff before he descended upon his food. He stopped smiling on the walk home when he realized he'd been backstabbing his wife, his other half...

### Left Brain: A Commentary

What I'm really talking about is the time eight years ago when I was 14 and attended the funeral service for my older brother at Sacred Heart Church in Melrose Park. He's my brother who committed suicide. He's my brother I've told no one about: my girlfriend, college friends, roommates, or people in my writing program at my graduate school in San Francisco. And I'm walking from the service with my grandparents back to their home a few blocks from the church. My grandmother is talking nonsense about fruit shapes and other bullshit. I can feel her inanity and also the heartache emanating from my grandfather, how this is not the right conversation to have at this moment. But my grandmother's blathering on and on and I'm walking in between them, looking at the mason's stamp in the sidewalk, trying not to think about my dead brother but waiting, just waiting for my grandmother to tell me what shape my dead brother is lying in a coffin. Which she does: stringbean. And I want to throttle her for being so oblivious, for being so incredibly stupid, about how I'm feeling and about what the fuck's a fruit and what isn't.

Many years later, after recent deaths of people close to me, I finally break down and tell my girlfriend this story. Something's been triggered and I'm crying, telling her about this, about my older brother, the first time she's hearing of his existence, who

would have been 29 had he not moved out, bought a rope, and hung himself in the living room of his apartment. She suggests I try writing about it. *It might help.* And my girlfriend smiles at me and wipes some tears that have collected in the corners of my eyes.

So I do. I write it. Or I try to. Because I'm a writer and it might be good to release some of these feelings from inside me. I start with the church and my grandparents and the heat of that August day but soon I begin fictionalizing. It's not even intentional really but, as a writer, I know it will *make a better story*. Sometimes, in order to get to the real heart of the matter, some facts need to be deleted, others added, all in the name of writing. I include my Auntie Mary Jo who didn't come to the funeral because she lives in Rhode Island and I turn her into a lesbian. She's not. She's married to my Uncle Angelo and they have two obnoxious kids. But I keep in my grandmother's conversation about the fruit shapes, as much as I can remember, and make up the rest about geometrical shapes. Because if nothing else, the *feeling* is still with me, whether or not the actual words are. And I become my grandfather, Bernard, sincere and reflective. For the most part anyway, the psychological parts – the parts that think my grandmother is a total idiot and make me want to kill her, the parts that make her old-fashioned, close-minded, and constipated. At 14 I didn't have the words, but at 22, and as a writer I do. And the story is coming along, it's taking a different path than what actually happened, but *it's okay*, I tell myself, because, *man, this story is really good*. I fudge some details and the story takes on some kind of spiritual, quasi-religious quality. I'm really liking it until I'm about halfway done when I realize I've taken out the part about my dead brother, the whole reason for my writing, the whole point of this cathartic release. He's gone from the story like he was gone from life. Images of him and I tossing the football in the backyard ("bullet passes" he called them that would knock me over when I caught them and I'd get up smiling, feeling manly), or of him taking me for a sundae one August afternoon in his new car, promising to let me drive it with him when I got my driver's permit, or the final one, dressed in a white turtleneck covering the rope burn, thin as a stringbean, up near the altar of Sacred Heart Church; these images are slowly fading from me. I stop typing. I had *actually believed* my aunt is a lesbian. I *actually forgot* about my dead brother.

It sounds impossible. How easy it was to erase him from the story. How easy it has been to erase him from my life. I try to convince myself that it's all been subconscious, the way my brain has decided to help me survive. *It was not intentional* I keep repeating to myself. But I cannot deny that a part of me has no brother, and that part is dominant. It's moments when I don't have memories of him at Christmas parties and family dinners when I should because *he was still alive* that I get choked up. Are these my memories or things I've created? What is my reality and what is not? Am I betraying myself? They are questions I fret about, wring my hands at the keyboard about, until I take solace in exactly that which is bothering me: I remember I am a writer. I have creative liberties. *All I am doing is telling a story.*

And slowly I become comfortable with the fact that writing inherently makes me a liar, a fibber, and a con artist. *It's okay* I repeat. *The story's better this way anyway.* Because I'm also lying to myself. I must manipulate myself, mold my emotions, say certain things the way they must be said in order for the story to be told. And everyone else, as a consequence, is manipulated. It's something we all know when writing or reading a story, all have agreed to go on this journey, yet sometimes refuse to accept. I sit in my room and conjure up fake instances, contort my feelings the right way so that the text can come out with some authenticity, some credibility, doing my best to make it *organic*. I put thoughts in my brain and I experience them first hand, like I have lived them. It still hurts all the same. Despite the fact that it's false, it doesn't *feel* that way. And ultimately, because I have forced myself to feel this pain, have plunged myself into this other place and emerged with the scars to prove it, it's my duty as a writer to make you feel this pain, cry when I cry, and bleed where I bleed, even if, and I hate myself for doing this to all of us, *I never had an older brother.*