

You are sitting across from Brian at Mitzi's. You are here, now.

BRIAN: I've been wondering if I should give up writing.

YOU: Writing your book?

BRIAN: Yeah, the book on meaning and God.

YOU: What led to this?

BRIAN: It's not that things are bad. It's actually that things are so good in my life. I don't need anything. I don't see a point in wanting God.

YOU: You're losing your appetite for God?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's what it feels like.

YOU: Well, what else is there?

BRIAN: I don't know of anything.

YOU: Well, some would say, "You'll figure something out."

BRIAN: I don't want to figure anything out.

YOU: Well, we all have to figure things out even if we don't want to. That's what some people would say.

BRIAN: What would you say?

You think about what to say.

YOU: You're younger. You're going through a time in life where you might be becoming more normal.

More well-adjusted, healthy, less inclined to set yourself against the people around you.

BRIAN: Yeah. That's what I've been feeling.

YOU: But I'm older. I've been through that. When the dust settles, you might end up like me. I'm not a very heroic person. You're more of a hero. But I still want reality.

BRIAN: Thanks. That helps.

A pause.

BRIAN: How do you do it?

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: I guess I don't need to know how. I just need to know that it's possible.

YOU: Sometimes people put a spiritual force into you. They push into you to make you someone new. Someone has to initiate you into their kingdom. So you have to initiate yourself back into your original kingdom, the one you're true to.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So do something decisive.

BRIAN: I think asking you to come here was part of it. You helped re-initiate me, just now.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: I guess this is the benefit of community.

YOU: Community is pretty powerful to do this.

BRIAN: But also just having the right kind of people floating through culture. But if you're trying to long for God, then you want God and God alone, and you have to be apart from the community. So yeah, you have to initiate yourself back.

YOU: Maybe someday there will be a community that respects the longing for God.

BRIAN: Maybe there's already a church somewhere that's like that.

YOU: Maybe.

BRIAN: Does your work make you fake?

YOU: Not really. My work is neutral in itself. I don't have to shake anyone's hand and smile.

BRIAN: Sometimes I wonder if I should get a job.

YOU: It does take your focus off of things like writing, or spiritual feelings. But with some jobs, like mine, you can focus on approaching it however you need to.

BRIAN: You can be present to your work in different ways?

YOU: Yeah. So you can say "I work" differently depending on where you are and where you want to be as a person.

BRIAN: So that way you can be true to what you really believe in.

YOU: But some jobs, maybe that's not so easy to do.

BRIAN: Like being in sales?

YOU: If you're a low-level sales rep, I imagine you can still pretty easily connect to a longing for God. The real danger is when you're a CEO and you're talking up your company, the one that was your idea and that does things that you believe in, but which aren't God.

BRIAN: Do you ever get anything interesting from the things you proofread?

YOU: It's always kind of interesting. While I'm proofreading. But then I tend to forget what I read.

BRIAN: What were you working on today?

YOU: Part of someone's autobiography, and a computer science paper.

BRIAN: What was in the paper?

YOU: It had to do with figuring out if there were duplicate strings in a database.

BRIAN: But you're going to forget that.

YOU: Yeah, that's the trend.

BRIAN: Is there math in it?

YOU: Yeah, and I don't understand it. The person who sent it to me is from China and I guess is pretty confident on the math, or has some other Chinese person who can check that. But the English is up to me.

BRIAN: That's cool. I know there are a lot of

academics writing in English who aren't native speakers. They're probably at a disadvantage in getting published, versus native speakers.

YOU: Yeah, like there could be some kind of service to get them all proofreaders.

BRIAN: That's pretty altruistic. Maybe you could do that.

YOU: I don't have the right kind of personality to set up something like that. I'm more of a follower.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess there's always that one woman's organization where you can tutor.

YOU: Yeah. Do you have anything to do to reach out to people?

BRIAN: Not really. I mostly focus on my writing.

YOU: That's good. But if you weren't writing, what would you do?

BRIAN: I have no idea. I like finding the roots of things. So maybe that would make me a good life coach? But I don't have the personality to freelance.

YOU: So someone should form a group practice of life coaches.

BRIAN: Absolutely.

YOU: Maybe you could join a church.

BRIAN: Yeah, churches can have little volunteer opportunities in them.

YOU: You could talk to younger people.

BRIAN: Yeah. The thing is, there are two kinds of churches. The churches who care about what their young people are taught, and the ones that don't. I wouldn't want to be a part of the kind that don't care, and I don't think any existing church is in line with my beliefs, and vice versa.

YOU: Speaking of young people, there was a young man who came through, named Mason... did I tell you about him?

BRIAN: No, I don't think so.

YOU: He sounded like a kindred spirit. Like a younger cousin type.

BRIAN: Great, maybe I'll see him.

YOU: Yeah, he might turn up here.

BRIAN: Maybe what I need to do is get my momentum going on my writing again.

YOU: Yeah?

BRIAN: Like that would be how I could reinitiate myself.

YOU: Yeah, that makes sense.

BRIAN: It's like who I am depends on what my past and future are. I can be a different person if my future changes.

YOU: Yeah, that's true. So you have to muster up the strength and then do something, in accordance with your past and future as writer.

BRIAN: And being a writer is a shorthand for my active and passive relationship to the truth.

YOU: So you're deciding to remain in a relationship.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess any long term relationship involves some times where it doesn't seem to make any sense, on any level.

BRIAN: Do you ever work here at the cafe?

YOU: No, not usually. I tried when I first started. It was fun, but too distracting.

BRIAN: I'm the same way with my writing. But the distractions are good.

YOU: Do you have any deadlines?

BRIAN: No, not really.

YOU: Eventually the deadlines get to you and reshape your habits so that you're always doing what's most efficient.

BRIAN: Maybe you could push back against the deadlines and be distracted. It's good to be distracted because then you're not as much in control. You're a pilgrim and a stranger.

YOU: That does sound like a good thing. Maybe there's a way to work distraction into my life intentionally.

BRIAN: But not too intentionally.

YOU: Yeah, I think holiness requires a certain kind of irresponsibility.

BRIAN: But not the wrong kind of irresponsibility.

YOU: No.

BRIAN: Not everyone has the patience to let themselves be irresponsible and suffer the consequences. And then they don't have patience with other people, to let them be irresponsible.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: So, I'm not giving up on my writing, because I'm irresponsible.

YOU: That makes sense.

BRIAN: On the level of, what I said makes sense, or living that out makes sense?

YOU: It makes sense to live that way. As long as you can live that way.

BRIAN: You're right. There are times when you have to swoop in and take control of your life again. Some times cry out for a deus ex machina.

YOU: Yeah, like mom.

BRIAN: Deus ex machinas are underrated.

YOU: Yeah, I can see why they wouldn't be appealing in made-up stories, but in real life, they're amazing.

BRIAN: But people say they're unrealistic.

YOU: Nothing that really comes to pass is unrealistic. But yeah, deus ex machinas can be too few, too far between.

BRIAN: God saves you when you really need it.

YOU: Except when he doesn't.

BRIAN: But he does, when he does. When it comes to pass, it's real.

YOU: Why doesn't God always save us?

BRIAN: Maybe he always does. We just don't know how long the play really is.

YOU: Yeah. I don't know if I'm patient enough to be open to that possibility.

BRIAN: I'm not always that patient.

YOU: But then, I keep living.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: So if you're holy by being irresponsible, how does that connect with perfection? Isn't holiness about being perfect?

BRIAN: No, I don't think so. I think holiness is about being true. If you're true to God, then you'll end up in the right place. But if you're perfect, you might not.

YOU: But if you're imperfect, then horrible things happen to you and other people.

BRIAN: That's true.

YOU: So how can you justify being holy?

BRIAN: If you're holy, in the long run, you can actually be perfect. But perfection without holiness is on a false foundation.

YOU: I guess that makes sense. If you're holy, you care about your imperfections, right?

BRIAN: Right.

YOU: But then how can you be irresponsible?

BRIAN: You have to be unaware, or unable to do what you want to do. Or get in situations that are beyond your control. Maybe situations that are too much for you to be aware, new situations.

YOU: Responsibility to the wrong things can be bad.

BRIAN: Responsibility is trying to be true to the world situation, first, rather than God. So you can misunderstand eternity.

YOU: But maybe there is no eternity.

BRIAN: You don't know that.

YOU: I don't.

BRIAN: And also, if you misunderstand the world situation, being completely responsible to that understanding will create temporal problems.

YOU: You can be irresponsible to different things, and that can shape your whole life.

BRIAN: Yeah, like being unable to connect with

social cues. There's a freedom in that.

YOU: Absolutely.

BRIAN: So, deadlines. Being responsible to deadlines.

YOU: Yes.

BRIAN: I remember those from college, but college was a while ago.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: And I didn't have my survival on the line. Didn't have to fill my belly by meeting deadlines.

YOU: You would be okay if you couldn't meet your deadlines. God would save you, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, he would. But I don't really believe that in my body.

YOU: No, I guess a lot of people are in your situation.

BRIAN: What's it like having to meet deadlines, to satisfy your body?

YOU: I guess... it connects me to reality. Well, to the world situation. Maybe not to eternity.

BRIAN: Simone Weil said something like that. Work as a way out of solipsism. I guess if you're working, you're really facing reality. You have to keep going until the process is done, and bring your body in conformity with outside reality, or else you starve, and you really do care about not starving.

YOU: Yeah, that's pretty much what it's like.

BRIAN: So everyone except a few people is responsible to this.

YOU: But you're not.

BRIAN: No, not really.

YOU: So you're free. And you're not living in the world with everyone else.

BRIAN: The monks worked on making baskets to sell. But they weren't living in the world with everyone else.

YOU: Maybe they had conquered the desire to fill their stomachs and instead they were working for other reasons.

BRIAN: In a way that sounds right. But they also were big on not being too good to need what everyone needs.

YOU: What's going to happen when we no longer have to work? According to Weil, wouldn't we be stuck in solipsism?

BRIAN: In a sense, yes. Unless there's something else that made things otherwise.

YOU: Huh. But human civilization can't help eliminating work. And if it artificially kept work around, that wouldn't even be the same as really having to work to survive.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess a lot of people don't care about

solipsism, though, so they're not going to mind.

BRIAN: I don't know. Yeah, I guess that's true. Maybe Weil was wrong, and we don't need work to avoid solipsism.

YOU: What else could there be? People?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's the obvious way to go. Maybe people are work, and will always be work.

YOU: I don't know, I think people can go through their whole lives without really having to work with people. If people are raised well, there's some work in getting that to happen, but after that, they can be really pleasant. And we can probably get rid of neuroticism with gene therapy, and eliminate anti-social tendencies on the genetic side. Then it's just a matter of time before we can have a perfect culture, on the cultural side, where no one needs to suffer because of other people. And maybe doesn't even have to work that hard to raise kids. The kids would be a little challenge, but not much of a challenge.

BRIAN: Yeah, we could have perfection, of a kind. But would we have holiness?

YOU: Why would anyone want holiness when they can have perfection?

BRIAN: I get pessimistic, that holiness will be forgotten and wiped out by perfection.

YOU: Yeah, and that makes you feel like you should give up on holiness yourself, right?

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: But don't give up on it.

BRIAN: Why not?

YOU: Because I said so. I don't need reasons.

BRIAN: You're the irresponsible one.

YOU: We're friends because we're irresponsible.

BRIAN: I guess that's the case with all friends.

YOU: Yes.

You both fall silent, your minds blanking for some reason. You've been sitting in this Mitzi's Cafe (the only one) for so long, talking so long. You've been talking a long time, having one of your long conversations. You decide to get up, and Brian also gets up, and you both go out to the street. There's someone there smoking.

WOMAN: Want a cigarette?

YOU: I don't smoke.

BRIAN: No thanks.

WOMAN: Understandable. You pink-lungs want to live forever.

BRIAN: Do you want to not live forever?

WOMAN: I'm just living the life I started to live a long time ago.

BRIAN: Yeah.

WOMAN: You know what I'm talking about?

BRIAN: I'm not addicted to any substances...

WOMAN: But you're addicted to something. Am I right?

BRIAN: Well...

WOMAN: ...Or am I right? Everybody's an addict. It's a fact.

YOU: Maybe somebody could not be an addict, somehow.

WOMAN: One person. One person in the whole world, one time. Once. Maybe. I wouldn't believe it if I saw it.

BRIAN: But yeah, I got started on something, and I'm still on it.

WOMAN: You're an addict. You have loyalty.

YOU: I don't think that loyalty has to be a form of addiction.

WOMAN: When would it not be?

YOU: Maybe it's like if you're addicted to someone, your eyes bug out...

WOMAN: Yes.

YOU: And your breathing gets faster.

WOMAN: Definitely.

YOU: And you have to have them.

WOMAN: All the time. Totally.

YOU: But if you're loyal to someone, you might think about them as often as someone who's addicted to someone. Maybe more often. But it's lightweight, and you don't have to have them. You're always open to them but you're never clutching them. You're hoping but not trying to make them be with you. It's like an obsession but it's completely different.

WOMAN: Who's the lucky man? Or woman?

You blush.

YOU: This is just something I think about.

WOMAN: Are you a novelist?

YOU: Not really.

WOMAN: If you're telling the truth about just thinking about this, you should be a novelist.

YOU: No.

WOMAN: Okay. So you, what's your name?

BRIAN: Brian.

WOMAN: Brian, okay. So are you loyal to life, or are you addicted?

BRIAN: I'm...

WOMAN: Because then you have a choice, addiction to life, or addiction to cigarettes. And clearly, addiction to cigarettes is better.

BRIAN: I think a lot of times I'm loyal to life.

WOMAN: But you're an addict. Get real. We're all addicts. Nothing but addiction. And a few weird people. One person, *maybe* who is loyal instead of addicted. Hey, you guys can just go back inside now. This is smokers' territory.

Just then two of her friends show up and she gives them cigarettes and they all light up.

WOMAN: You guys are going to get secondhand smoke. It's not safe for you out here. Go back inside, pink-lungs. Drink your beverages in there.

It sounds like more or less good advice to you and Brian, so you take it.

BRIAN: That was real.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: So one thing that is real for me, is how I have to be faithful to my ideas.

YOU: We're talking about the difference between your work and my work?

BRIAN: Yeah. So I don't have any deadlines, anything where I have to push myself to meet the world. But I have the reverse. When an idea comes, I have to entertain it, write it down. That's how reality meets me. And, now that I think about it, that's not solipsistic. But it's different than trying to meet a deadline. It's almost like, when you're not solipsistic, there's more than one being, at least two beings. But with this, it's like there's less than one you, there's more like zero yous.

YOU: There can certainly be an "extinction of personality" when you're trying to meet a deadline or a customer's demands.

BRIAN: Sometimes I stay up late just to try to get an idea to its conclusion. I don't want to forget anything.

YOU: When I was younger, I would write short stories, and sometimes to get the mood right, if they were stream of consciousness, I would stay up as late as I had to to get them all in the same mood. But then I found that all the short stories got kind of loopy toward the end.

BRIAN: I have more things to say about all this, but I'm getting tired, so I'm forgetting everything.

YOU: You want to give up on this conversation?

BRIAN: No, I guess not. If I did, we wouldn't get to the bottom of it.

YOU: But this way we can keep talking, later.

BRIAN: If we remember.

YOU: You don't think we'll remember?

BRIAN: We might.

YOU: Maybe it'll come up again. It's worth talking about something twice if it's prompted by two different life events.

BRIAN: You may be right.

YOU: It is pretty late.

BRIAN: The monks used to stay up late at night, in prayer.

YOU: How unhealthy of them.

BRIAN: The monks were pretty unhealthy. Not eating either.

YOU: They didn't do drugs, though.

BRIAN: They got mixed up in the spiritual world, though.

YOU: With loyalty, or addiction?

BRIAN: They had to learn loyalty by losing their addictions.

YOU: Actually, not eating can make you live longer.

BRIAN: Yeah, but sometimes it doesn't.

YOU: It really is late.

BRIAN: We're friends, we're irresponsible.

YOU: Is this the good kind of irresponsible?

BRIAN: I don't know.

YOU: Where's Julia tonight?

BRIAN: I don't know. I wonder what she would have said about all this.

YOU: Maybe we'll remember enough to rehearse these points.

BRIAN: We probably won't, though.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: It's been a long night. We talked about a lot of different things.

YOU: Yeah, I should go.

You both get up and go out the door and walk your various ways through a cloud of secondhand smoke.

You are both...

WAITING FOR MARGOT

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...

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COMMENTS

(no comments)

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