



The Day I Met Joey Slotnick

by Robert Bradley Fuchs

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I've always thought the world revolved around me. I don't think that's unusual for a child, especially an only child, but it's a trait that most of us outgrow around the age of eight. Or twelve. Or sometime before the age of twenty six. Going unpicked when they choose up sides for kickball games in P.E. for two years running tends to shatter that image. Especially when your best friend is the captain. And you pay him \$2 to pick you. And the last choice comes down to you and the Stephen Hawking clone in the wheelchair. So what if he understands particle physics and the space-time continuum? He can't kick.

That would send most kids crashing down to Earth, but not me. I studied science in school, and I'm pretty sure they taught us the theories of Galileo and Copernicus, about the heliocentric universe. Not by name, obviously, but I clearly recall Benny Schlossenberg making a mobile comprised of Styrofoam balls representing the planets revolving around an orange for a sun for the second grade Science Fair. But somehow it mutated in my mind. In my imagination, the sun revolved around the moon, the Earth took the shape of a rhombus, the Milky Way tasted like a Snickers, and our elliptical solar system revolved around me.

I'm not sure how that happened. My science background was spotty at best and it is quite possible that I skipped out on class that day. Like most kids, I wasn't fond of school; I was on the anti-social side growing up, so I wasn't fond of much other than Nintendo games and drawing pictures of Chewbacca on my sketch pad.

Those distractions proved a deadly combo that often won in the tug-of-war between play and study time. But I knew I couldn't let down my doting parents with failing grades. It would break their hearts. I was their love, their joy, their hope for a comfortable retirement. So I needed a ruse, some measure of chicanery. But being an only child of overprotective Jewish parents, pretending to be sick wasn't an option. No, they weren't doctors. They were even worse: they were worriers. They had all of the intuition of a medical practitioner, but none of the know-how.

When I claimed illness my mom would take me to Beth Israel or Mount Sinai for diagnostics. Traffic be damned. Rush hour on the FDR Drive was of little consequence when this was life or death. My parents knew people on the boards, so appointments were never a problem. We showed up and got whisked away from the truly sick, the truly needy—the guy with a knife sticking out of the side of his head, the woman oozing bilious green fluid from her side—and were sent to a quiet room where a young, eager doctor would check me out.

Before he would introduce himself, my mother would cut him off, taking out a legal pad from her handbag, suggesting exotic

diseases. "He claims his stomach aches, Doctor. Could it be dysentery? Maybe cholera?" It was like she came up with diseases after watching me lose one too many games of Oregon Trail.

"Then dengue, perhaps? Or the plague?" My mom was once convinced that I had Endometriosis until the doctor explained the high improbability due to my lack of a uterus. (She had me take the test done anyway, just to be safe).

I wondered where she came up with these diseases, if she studied the Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedias that gathered mold in our basement. (Funk from the Latin, meaning the earthy mood of jazz or soul as played by James Brown, and Wagnalls from the Flemish, meaning a cheap imitation of Encyclopedia Britannica).

She was so sure that I was unwell, seriously unwell, that I was on my deathbed, that she could cause a panic. Pandemonium. Sometimes she would so spook the doctor with her facile memorization of symptoms that he, a man with an advanced degree, Ph.D. in being a doctor, would have to confer with an older, more experienced physician before confirming that I was fine. But she had me so sufficiently scared from her diagnosis that even when I knew I was healthy going in, I wasn't so sure on the way out.

Oddly, while I thought she would be thrilled that her only child was indeed going to make it through the day, my mom always seemed disappointed with the diagnosis on the ride home. I couldn't tell if she was upset with her lack of medical know-how, or she was convinced that the supposed expert was missing something. "So what if he spent eight years in medical school?" she said. "I've spent ten years being a mom."

Or maybe she was angry with me for hiding what was wrong, for coughing a different way, for not looking so frail, for not sniffling sufficiently for those ten minutes we were in his office. For not displaying the symptoms of the impending death that she knew I had.

On days when she couldn't take off from work and drive me to a hospital, I was sent to Dr. Cohen, my local pediatrician, where invariably I was given a lollipop and a test for strep throat. I went once claiming food poisoning and was given a lollipop and a strep test. The lollipop I could understand. But what was it about sticking a cotton swab down your esophagus that made a doctor feel like a man?

Dr. Cohen was a large man, with soft rolls of flesh spilling out, busting the buttons on his white coat. He smiled at me as he shoved the swab down my throat. I tried not to gag as I wondered how a man who weighed on the wrong side of three hundred pounds could

possibly be a doctor. Why should I listen to him? Or practice what he preached? He clearly didn't. "Eat three sensible meals a

day. Exercise," he said. Did he mean for it to be taken literally? Or were these kind of suggestions? It was like going to a blind barber. Or a naked tailor. Maybe they knew what they were doing, but I wouldn't have faith.

I hated going to the waiting room. If I didn't go in with a cold, I came home with one. At least in the hospital we were important, so we got to avoid this. Here, not so much. I detested it, being around other people, being around sick people especially. I always wanted a separate waiting room, craved it. There should have been three: A room for the sick, one for the not-so-sick, and a quarantine for the highly contagious.

I wasn't sick. There was no reason to breathe in someone else's germs. Most of the other kids were all right; they were in the same boat I was. We'd look at each other and nod.

"Exam?"

"Yeah, long division. You?"

"Paper on the American Indians."

"Bummer."

But there was always one kid there. A kid who belonged. His face was puffy. His hair was pasted onto his head with sweat. And his nose was a spigot that he wiped on the issue of Highlights magazine tucked under his arm. And he sat next to you every time, even if all of the other seats are open. (Coincidentally, I think that kid grew up to be the guy who enters the men's room, spies the ten empty urinals, and chooses the one directly next to mine.)

So pretending to be sick at home was not an option. I had no choice but to bypass the parent system altogether. But I had a plan. I had an in. Her name was Mrs. Segal.

She didn't look like much, Gladys Segal. Fifties. Curly hair, glasses. She looked like someone's aunt, and if I had to venture a guess, she probably was. She was the school's secretary, and we formed a bond. Kind of like Harold and Maude without all that creepy sexual tension.

So whenever there was an exam for which I hadn't sufficiently studied, or a homework assignment I hadn't completed, I excused myself from class, marched my little self down to her office and proclaimed myself sick. Not actually being sick, that might have been a problem. But lacking tangible symptoms such as a fever, chicken pox, or a trail of gastric discharge, I went with the old reliable, the unprovable: I had a headache. A bad one. The biggest, hugest, most mind-blowing headache known to man. I wasn't known

for hyperbole in elementary school, but I could moan and hold my head with the best of them.

Mrs. Segal, being a kind older woman, probably knew I was lying but allowed me to stay. She fed me aspirin and put up a pot of coffee while we spoke and played gin rummy for a nickel a hand. Because of this there are entire gaps in my elementary education, voids that haunt me to this day (for example: multiplication tables, The War of 1812).

But on the plus side, I knew which teacher was an unwed mother, that the principal's daughter was caught in the bathroom smoking pot, and I could recite the intimate details of the Spalding clan from *Guiding Light*. I could have been learning, but I was in Mrs. Segal's office, playing cards and drinking coffee. And in the end, what better preparation for life is there than shirking responsibility while gambling and schmoozing and getting a caffeine fix?

But I can't blame my miseducation squarely on Mrs. Segal. I once went a whole year of elementary school without a science teacher. I attended the Midwood Day School in Brooklyn. There the day was split into two halves, morning and afternoon, or more specifically, English and Hebrew. English in the morning, Hebrew in the afternoon.

Morning was presumably like a morning at any other school, only compressed to cram all of the English language subjects into half a day. From the hours of eight till twelve, we tackled our reading, our penmanship, our social studies. The afternoon was in Hebrew, where in addition to learning the guttural language, we passed notes and poked fun at the little Israeli man in the front of the room. We also studied the Bible, the history of Israel, and inexplicably, presumably because it is the international language, math.

Midwood Day was a private school, so we weren't mandated by the state or city, or whoever had jurisdiction. They made up rules as they went along. There was a teacher shortage at the time, so the subject matter and availability of classes was strictly on a need to know basis. We had science about twice a week, art twice a month, and gym consisted of us running around unsupervised for hours on end.

But we loved Phys Ed. We had co-ed lockers for Phys Ed a year before we had health class, so while we didn't know what we were looking at, or why we were looking at it, it was the highlight of our weeks.

In the fourth grade, they hired a full-time science teacher, Mrs. McCall. She was good, but strict. Being Catholic, naturally she had been disciplined by ruler, beaten by nuns, and we knew better than to mess with her. We didn't judge her, as this was what she knew; she was one of them. The school board knew this, but none of the Jewish teachers wanted the gig, so they said what the hey.

But Mrs. McCall had two things going against her at this very

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Jewish of schools. One, she was named Mrs. McCall. Mrs. Christine McCall. Of the McCalls of St. Paul, Minnesota. The second, she was pregnant. As it turned out, very pregnant. And being pregnant while being a McCall was apparently not the best career move for a science teacher at the Midwood Day School.

They never brought her back after she came to term. Who knew what a pregnant Catholic might teach? Besides, science wasn't a great priority at a religious school, what with it poking holes through many a belief from the Bible. My parents tried to fill the void by giving me subscriptions to *Ranger Rick* and *3-2-1 Contact*, disguising their own homework assignments as gifts. I read them, but science is still new to me.

But this concept of the world not revolving around me is an important one for me now; I have a girlfriend currently, and we try with our might to make sure that these two planets don't collide.

My girlfriend spent last night at my place and invariably when she comes over I'm unable to sleep. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I don't like people watching me when I sleep. It's a fear I've had since childhood and goes a long way toward explaining how I sleepwalked through my first two years of undergrad sharing a room with an odd boy with freakishly long fingernails who might or might not have stared at me in my sleep.

Being an only child, I had my own room, and the thought of sharing a room repulsed me. I refused to go to sleep-away camp for fear of bunking up with other kids and being subject to wet willies, or pantsing, or the trick with your hand in warm water. I don't know what happens when one person is asleep and the other person is not. And I don't want to know.

I can't sleep on public transportation, not on the bus or subway. No matter how deprived of sleep I might be, I can't sleep on a plane, regardless of the time of day or length of flight. In fact, the only time I can sleep in transit is when I'm driving and alone at the wheel.

So perhaps that fear that explains why I can't sleep when she comes over. Or maybe it has to do with the fact that I tend to sleep diagonal, stretching from one corner to the other. You'd think a Queen-sized bed would be fine for two people of normal proportions. But it's not. Also, you'd think meds would help. But they haven't kicked in yet. I'll give them another week.

But I don't want to disinvite her, because, of course, that would mean that there's something wrong. That it is a bigger problem than it is. That it represents something. That instead of moving forward, our relationship is moving back. In addition to being a woman, she also studies Psychology, so there is no such thing as an innocent action. If I can't sleep, she assumes that it is my subconscious telling her I don't want her there. So I lay there, trying to fall asleep, pretending to fall asleep, and sometimes, I fall asleep.

We wake up mid-afternoon. We both have full days planned so we get right to work. She curls up on the sofa with a textbook, studying for a big Psych exam. She wants me to sit with her, but I go online to read an article about the New York Knicks. So what if the basketball season is months away? It is all about priorities. I've known Sabrina for six months, but I've been watching sports my entire life.

But we're hungry and food doesn't make itself. Apparently midterms are more important than fantasy basketball. So I have to make breakfast.

I tell her, "When we're married, you'll have to do some of the cooking." Or, "When we're married and on a budget, you'll have to buy the cheap bread. The Albertson's \$0.99 loaf." I don't care if she likes the seven grain bread from Trader Joe's that costs \$3.89. If her mom wants to buy it for her, fine. But not on my dime. It's bread. Bread. One grain will do. How many grains does one man need?

Sometimes, if I talk with the baker, he gives me some post-dated rolls for free. He winks as he bags it up for me. So what if it has white spots after the first day—that's protein. Mold? That's vegetables. Its green, isn't it? When I go to the bakery I don't just get bread, I get the whole food pyramid.

I think I can tell her anything if I start off with "when we're married." Those words have great power. "When we're married." When we're married, you'll make breakfast. When we're married, you'll paint the garage. When we're married, I'll sleep with your sister.

(Did I say that? Or just think that? Seriously, when she reads this—which she will—I'm looking forward to a twenty minute chat about whether or not I was kidding and then she'll ask if I think her kid sister is cuter than her. This will be followed by a dissertation about how every joke has a grain of truth. My response: Just a grain? How about seven? She'll storm out of the room.) But that's okay. I tell her I want to marry her and everything is golden. That phrase implies permanence. That shows I care.

So she leaves, she has to go see her mom, which brings me to Joey Slotnick. Well, not quite to Joey Slotnick. Because not all roads take you to Joey Slotnick. Just Finley Avenue, where I was walking to get cheap bread. So who is Joey Slotnick? An actor. He's not a big name, but that's not why he does it. Not everyone is Ben Affleck. Some people do it for the art. So no, he's no Stephen Dorff. And Skeet Ulrich he is not. But when he plays characters named Burger Jungle Manager, Soda Jerk and Doris fan #2, you know he's not in it for the fame. This is an artiste.

He was walking his dog, unless it was someone else's dog. Maybe he was researching a role. The role of a man with a dog. He could be taking this acting thing seriously. Method all the way. Bob DeNiro has nothing on him. I'll check the credits after the next romantic

comedy: Joey Slotnick...Man with dog.

Or maybe he was hard up for cash and answered an ad on Craig's List: Television Star wanted to walk daschund.

I thought of saying hi. Of introducing myself. I knew who he was, so it only seemed fair. We might as well be on equal footing in this relationship. But then I thought better of it. He must get recognized

all the time. Sure, not everyone knows his name, saw him as the teacher who fell in love with his underage student on Boston Public, saw him as Jonathan Silverman's best friend—with the hot Asian wife, by the way—on *The Single Guy*. But they recognized him. The guy from that thing. Hey, aren't you the guy who loiters by the Rite Aid off Santa Monica? No? Are you sure?

We locked eyes and nodded and then he passed, the moment over. And that's when it hit me: he had no idea who I was. Not a clue. Not a glimmer... nothing. And it hurt. It really did. To him, I was just a guy. A good looking guy. A well dressed guy. But just a guy. He might make it big playing Man With Dog. In fact, I know he will. He'll be a star. And I will be just one man, one among many in this world, revolving around... Joey Slotnick.