

*Jody Azzouni:* I'm sitting on a bus, and I spontaneously think of the opening paragraph. And I'm scribbling it down in the margins of some religious pamphlet or other—a piece of paper with some white space that I've frantically grabbed from the floor of the bus (wet footprints on it) or maybe it's a napkin.

It's a napkin, and I'm trying to get the stupid pen to write on the napkin, holding it in place on my knees with my gloves (because it's winter and it's cold). And it's really annoying because the pen is punching holes through the napkin. Paper is always damp in winter, have you noticed that? I've tried writing stuff directly on my pants when I get ideas, in desperation I mean, but it never works.

Because I'll forget the paragraph if I don't write it down right away. Because I know I'll have the story—the whole story—if I can just get that paragraph down on a piece of paper. Because that paragraph has a voice. And when I can write a voice down, I've got the sensibility behind it. I've captured the person. I already know that this voice belongs to a girl; I already know that she's an adolescent; I already know that she's pissed.

I miss my stop, of course. This is in 1997—when I wrote the story. I still miss stops. Or I look up and I'm in Queens. Or somewhere else I'm not going. I can't do everything at once. I should stop trying.

You hear this sort of advice from writing teachers: the central character in the story has to develop. And we have to see that development in the story as we read it. Narrational development. In real time. That's what keeps us interested: watching the process of somebody having an insight in real time. Oedipus. The horror slowly dawning. Well, I don't know. Sometimes someone we need to listen to can't *tell* a story: she's too scattered or flaky to tell her story. At least not one at a time. Can't *we* put the pieces together?

There's an insight. In the story. There's development. A development, maybe. There's somebody having an insight. In the story.

# Mom on Paper

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My mother is a writer, a pretty famous one. I find a collection of her short stories at a nearby library (a small one) and sit down for a good time. (I'm smiling, I can't help myself.) An old guy, sitting across the table from me, smiles too. "Good, huh?" he says. "Oh yeah," I whisper. I go through the first story in the book line by line, intently, and with a pen (a bic). I don't underline *every* sentence, just the lies. And next to each underlined sentence, I write clearly in the margin: A LIE.

Most stories get pretty marked up. She's published poetry too, lots of it, in little chapbooks. I can't wait.

Dr. Friedman (he's my therapist) thinks I wanted to get caught. (That's what he tells me. I say: "aren't you supposed to just sit there?") But here's the thing, right? I never get caught in the library, not in any of them, and I hit about fifty, easy, before I even *considered* a bookstore. Does that sound like I wanted to get caught?

Bob told me there's this term from the early seventies when he "was a youth" called *peaking*. It's what happens at the best point in a trip (that's what taking acid is called: tripping; sounds

*disingenuous* if you ask me.) But that's what it's like when I'm going through the books. Dr. Friedman says (he's very indirect this way) that we get off ("awfff," he says) on sex, on food, on scratching an itch (his examples: no shit) so if I'm getting off "wielding a bic," it's got to be coming from somewhere else. "Where do you think it's coming from?" he asks me. I shrug (translation: *Whatever*).

I met Bob because he busted me in a Barnes and Noble's, well not him exactly, one of his assistants or whatever those guys with badges are called. They take me to this back room (an *office* they call it but without windows, that neo-bombshelter look—bright red cinder blocks; really stuffy ventilation: you'd think it was to torture the shoplifters but poor Bob has to sit in there all day waiting for "culprits").

I've been in them before. Sometimes with a manager, sometimes with a guard. You've got to be careful, but you can always tell if they want to sleaze on you because they have this *I'm on your side* look. They don't always act on it, some of them just get snide: "why don't you get a boyfriend so you can find something else to do with your hands?"—shit like that. But some of them reach out and touch. I tell them about Dad the lawyer and they stop.

Here's Dr. Friedman *pontificating*: "Autobiography is a delicate art." So's hypocrisy, I tell him. We get into an argument about that. "Exactly what's hypocritical about writing about your family?" (What's *hypocritical* about making up stuff? Lying? is that what you *mean* to ask me?) He gets the fucking dictionary out on me (one point for the good doctor), but I get him back next time.

He's better than some: "See these words?" this is one of the guards speaking, "*Fiction*. Know what 'fiction' means kiddo?" (Oh smart, real smart, get on my good side. That way the next chance I get I pull out one of your so-called *history* books, and *annotate that*.)

"Conflict of interest," I tell Dr. Friedman. "It's all about conflict of interest." He doesn't get it. (Yeah right, this is the guy that talks to his patients about why the fee should be raised *during their sessions*.) I mean *come on*, a writer writing about her family, taking the good bits out of context (twisting your jokes up so they look bad)?

I mean, listen to this: "His head, its shine, suggests fertility." Ok, Friedman says, not getting it. It's revenge I tell him, "*ok?*" and it's really petty.

Bob says (he's the cool manager): "Ask me if I care." (That's a rhetorical command.) I say, "Hey I didn't start this," we weren't getting along yet, "this *let's get to know each other shit* you did ok? And I'm underage in case you forgot." That was mean, I admit it, but look I'd dealt with guys like him before. "I really like purple hair." Yeah sure. Bob sputters (really!) that he's not flirting with me or anything like that.

"What about you?" Dr. Friedman asks, when I tell him what I said to Bob. *Oh right* I tell him. I'm *fifteen* ok? I may walk the walk and talk the talk but I'm just *you know* imitating the adults. (I reached puberty at twelve because I didn't stop eating chicken soon enough ok?) I don't really know what I'm doing (*morally speaking* I mean). Ok? Friedman is smirking at me.

I said something similar to Mr. Bob (this is all before we started getting along—that happened later): he'd said, "You're in a lot of trouble young lady," and I said: "how much trouble can I be in? I'm fourteen and I wasn't even shoplifting." I mean, it's Barnes and Noble's right? half the books in there are being read by homeless people all day long: how good shape can they be in?

"Oh you're being condescending to me," I tell Dr. Friedman, "that's so cute. More amusing than mangos." And then I make the gagging gesture in case he doesn't get it.

I tell both of them about my dad. My favorite story, I'm really young (I'm sitting on his knees in front of a mirror) and he's telling me that he's the best looking man I'll ever meet. *See?* he says *isn't your dad really handsome?* "I was really hot for him," I tell Friedman, "fantasies and everything." (I don't tell Bob this.)

Dr. Friedman is drumming his fingers. "Cut it out," he says. So I tell him more about my Dad, his being Arabic and all, escaping to the United States in the arms of some rich woman because he's so good-looking, making a living as a gigolo, Dr. Friedman looking at the ceiling going "yeah yeah yeah."

I tell Bob how I won the lottery a few months ago and how Mom and Dad are now in a big custody fight over me, and a little about this kidnapping scheme Dad dreamed up to get me away from Grandma.

“Yeah, I was thinking about that while you were talking,” Bob says, “how come he doesn’t take you to Saudi Arabia?”

“Wrong kind of Arab,” I tell him.

“Eh?” Dr. Friedman said, when I get to this point in the story. But Bob just looks at me.

“He’s a *Christian* Arab,” I explain.

“Oh right. Those guys in Lebanon.” This is Bob.

“Wrong again. He’s a Palestinian.”

“Palestinians are Christian?” This is Bob again. Dr. Friedman would have just said “Eh?” but we never got to this point.

I can tell I’ve made an impression on Bob. All of sudden I’m interesting, impressive even—it doesn’t work with Dr. Friedman, but I’m reading up on multiple personality disorder and Satanic cults (they’re really into that shit). Anyway, I explain to Bob that most of the leadership of the PLO is Christian Arab. “I didn’t know that,” he says.

Here’s how it works in short stories: I give you the dialogue, and you figure out what’s going on. (Mom says: “Show it, don’t tell it,” but all *she* means is *leave stuff out*.)

Bob says: “I’m Jewish, you know?” I didn’t know. (Do people think they wear these sorts of things on their sleeves?) “So what are you telling me?” I ask, “that we have something in common or that we don’t?” Something moves in his face, some kind of twitch. “Ok,” he says at last, “fuck that. What about the wolf?” (I love him at this point, I swear it.)

I tell Dr. Friedman I'm A.D.D. He tells me I'm not that it's all an act. I tell him that I'm acting out (that all teenagers do it) that there's a difference between acting and acting out (it's kind of the same difference between loving someone and being in love) that he should get out more, read about teenagers, empathize a little, relive his childhood (look at some baby pictures if he has to). He's drumming his fingers. He tells me my behaviors are age-appropriate. I tell him about Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. He tells me that DSM-IV is only for insurance forms.

Here's the diagnostic criteria for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: six or more of the following: bad on details, can't sustain attention in *tasks* or play activities ("play activities"!), doesn't listen (what I'm always told), can't follow instructions, loses things, easily distracted (how I get caught when I do), often forgetful. (Mom gave me DSM-IV for my birthday—came express mail. Did that piss Dr. Friedman off!)

When I tell Bob I'm A.D.D., he says, "what's that?" and I say, "Oh right, and where did you say you work? in a bookstore?"

This is where we start getting along: Bob lights a cigarette (I'm sitting on his desk, my arms *draped* around my bent legs). "Isn't it illegal to smoke in here?" I tell him. "Yeah? so? what are you going to do about it?" I wink at him (*really*). "Nothing. I just want one." He looks at me a second, cracks up, shakes one out for me (piece of cake).

A little later I'm telling him: "Ok I'll make you a deal (take it or leave it), next time I'm in here I'll use Post-it's, ok?"

The guard (this is after he says: "what's with all the heavy metal in your face?"): "So do we call your mother?" "You can," I tell him, "but I don't live with her." (He's sweating for some reason and I know it isn't because of me. The room isn't that hot either; he's probably got some weird disease.)

"Do you know how much someone *gets* for a short story?" I tell Bob. "*She* doesn't live on her earnings; she lives on *his* earnings and he's a cosmetic surgeon." "I don't need to hear this," the guard tells me. (He wasn't a nice guy, not at all.) So when he says, "What about your father? Don't you have a father?" I say, "Which one do you want to know about? the academic drunk who doesn't remember the next morning how the furniture got broken up? or the skeezy stepfather who wants to take a bath with me?" "I didn't need to hear this either," he says. (He eventually calls Mom, even though I'm living with Grandma.)

After we get into an argument about whether "corny" is a word or not (Bob says yes; I say no), he wants to know what the deal is with the nose rings. "It's not a generational thing," he tells me, "because lots of you don't go near it, tattoos neither."

"Long hair wasn't a generational thing either, then."

"Sure it was." (I don't say anything) "Only nerds weren't wearing it."

"Yeah like the nerds dying in Viet Nam," I tell him, "I got a reader on that."

“A what. a *reader*?” (he’s really pissed off at that for some reason), “you’ve got a *reader* on Viet Nam?”

“Yeah?” I say.

“See Dick shoot? Shoot Dick shoot? See Dick run?” (I’ve no idea what the *fuck* he’s talking about and wave my hand past my head to let him know.)

“Never mind,” he says. He takes a drag on the cigarette.

The guard going, “Wait! I’ve heard of her. Didn’t she make some neat posters?” as if he hasn’t had her book (the one they caught me marking up) under his arm for the last half hour; but there it is like an aura around me: suddenly I’ve ascended; I’m one of the chosen ones, he sees my good qualities, my blue eyes, my cool nose. If we were in a bar I’d be drinking free all night.

This is how the wolf gets into it: I tell him that Mom’d never be friends with someone like him. How come? he wants to know. “Because you don’t have a pet wolf,” I tell him. “How’s that?” he says (Friedman says, “Eh?” right on schedule when we get to the wolf). “A pet wolf, and you’ve got stories, nice anecdotes, even if you aren’t very imaginative. How it jumped up on a car while you were taking it for a walk,” and he interrupts me *of course*.

“Wolves do that?”

“See? you’re already interested.”

“Ok ok I get the point, but *can* wolves do that? you know someone who’s got one?” I don’t but I tell him all about Lena and her wolf anyway, how she couldn’t decide on its name (until it ate her boyfriend Joe, and then she didn’t have to name it because they put it to sleep instead). Bob gets worried: “Isn’t it against the law to have a pet wolf?” “Sure,” I tell him (and this is *true*), “in

New York it is, but not in *Arizona*.” And the thing about Mom is, right? she can write a story and call the wolf *Lestat* (for drama) or *Rover* (for irony). A wolf makes it all easy.

Dr. Friedman, he misses the point. He says, “how come you’re into wolves?” And I tell him, “how come you always want to hear about the men in my life?” And when I tell him that I’m beside myself in love (with Bob), he says: “Funny you put it that way.” Oh yeah, right. How would *you* put it?

Bob says: “Paroxysms are a thing of the past; nowadays we only have spasms.” I’ve *no* fucking clue until he spells it for me. (Oh right, paroxysms of rage.) We talk about how no one *says* it anymore, even though you still find people *writing* the word; Bob says it used to pop up in ordinary conversation. “Don’t go having a paroxysm and all,” I say. He laughs (paroxysmal episode there), and explains that it’s about “linguistic drift,” and twenty years is all it takes (a generation).

“Sounds like peroxide,” I tell him. “That’s my point,” he says, “later vocabulary runs interference, makes a word sound dumb, weird or funny. So it drops out of usage because people no longer like the sound of it.”

Bob says, “If John commits to communism then he’ll be hostile to capitalism.” “Yeah?” I say. “It doesn’t sound weird to you?” “Sound weird how?” “Commits to?” “Huh?” (“Eh?”) “*If John commits to communism*, that doesn’t sound weird to you?” “No?” “See? it sounds wrong to me. I want to say: ‘If John commits *himself* to communism then he’ll be hostile to capitalism.’”

“Which is right?” I ask (I think that’s what he wants me to do, but I’m wrong). “Who knows? but all you people, you know, kids your age, that’s what you say. I hear it all the time.” Bob’s really into this shit.

It’s a generational thing. “I’m a linguist,” I tell Dr. Friedman. “That’s what I’m going to study in college.” He doesn’t react, so I go back to telling him how hot I used to be for Dad (you know, like when I was three).

Anyway Bob says (we’d been at it an hour or so, and I’d told him about all the other pop psychology books Mom gave me for Christmas), “I’m not charging you with anything.”

“How come?” I ask.

“It’s my last day. Every now and then it’s time to move on, know what I mean?”

“Oh thanks,” I say, “advice from a guy who lives with cinderblocks.”

“Whatever,” he tells me, just like he’s imitating someone.