

The Schwank-Meyer Method

by Danielle La Valle

Emile Jurgen Schwank-Meyer tumbled forth into the world.

His mother had gone into early labour in the middle of a field in Bavaria. She was sixteen, underfed, exhausted and terrified. It was six hours before a local shepherd found her. She had hemorrhaged beneath a large beech, its swirling roots framing the smaller twisting tendrils of ash blonde hair that spread out behind her. As the shepherd approached little Emile kicked and swung his tiny red fists vigorously at the site of another human life. Grasping up at the air, clouds, sun and finally the young man's smooth almost feminine oval face. In another life this shepherd could have posed for a Caravaggio Madonna. He couldn't say how he knew or rather felt, but this little red creature putting forth his fists now as if to claim a life, would one day change the world.

Molting

In front of the glass tower a cement quadrangle was being beautified. The usual pansies and petunias were shoved into raised beds and urns. Despite these efforts, it was still just a grey field that radiated despair.

It was here that it happened, in front of the Lithuanian girls hockey team. The tour bus had deposited them for a stretch and a washroom break. Those who chose not to stray too far from the bus, had found themselves enticed by the sweet smoke of a hot dog stand. One of them had never seen so many toppings. She decided to put a miniscule amount of each one on to her hotdog. Once she ran out of horizontal space she began to create vertical layers.

When it happened, she screamed but no sound left her mouth. Her surprisingly manicured hand pulverized what had become a triple-decker hot dog. Long after it had been squeezed in half and splattered onto her converse, her hand had kept on squeezing until her manicured nails dug deeply into her soft, white palm.

Alex, the CEO, was hairy — like an ape. More specifically, a bonobo. He liked bonobos. It was true perhaps that yes maybe they spent a little too much time on one particular activity, but they seemed like a happy and gentle lot. One might even argue that when they weren't engaged in this favourite activity, there was something like a quiet nobility to them.

Pants, skirt, crinoline, horse, flounder, chickadee, royal purple. He repeated whatever words came to him now in front of the mirror. Dr. Schwank-Meyer told him this was his brain's way of expelling toxic energy. He had become increasingly unsure of Dr. Schwank-Meyer's method but nonetheless had purchased his book, *The Way Across and Around*. The book began, "Firstly, we must consider Soren, Pigeon Keeper by trade, who is ragged but happy." This first line had unexpectedly made him tear up, and at the time, he had no idea why. But now he did. It was because he would never be happy. He knew too much, had seen too much, had done too much. If he could have, at that moment, he would have traded places with Soren even though he was terrified of pigeons.

He undressed slowly in the washroom. It was a communal washroom but what did that matter now? He rolled down his \$50 Merino wool socks and tossed them into the garbage. He was shedding many unnecessary skins, both small and large.

Now fully nude, he stood looking out over the quadrangle. It was cold up there. He hadn't really thought of the wind at that height. He considered now how these concerns or ponderings over temperature and weather were also unnecessary skins. And then, he jumped off.

Realignment

Her head hurts. Her face doesn't work anymore.

"Even the stump wonders what it could have been if it had been allowed to remain a tree." That was what Dr. Schwank-Meyer had said. Miriam wondered what exactly the \$250 60-minute sessions were doing for her. She was thankful that her head hurt slightly less than it did last time. Grateful also that Matthew's insurance was covering everything.

"We aren't divorced yet and I'd like to think after all these years that we're friends at least if nothing else." Matthew was not her friend; she was certain of at least that much. Besides, she knew that he was only doing this because he was hoping that she would change her mind at the last minute. It had been a good decade since she had felt anything approximating affection for him. Yes, this did make her feel like a terrible person. But as Dr. Schwank-Meyer had said at nearly every session so far, "The halves that comprise the whole are misaligned." Besides causing her to imagine a dangerously balanced Jenga tower made of her own grey matter, it gave her hope that after a certain number of sessions, these errant parts would slide neatly back into place.

His office was located in a genteel suburb, curved streets wound in on themselves. A magnolia was in bloom at every third or fourth house. You could sit down at one of several perfectly placed benches to

drink a coffee, read a book or just look up thoughtfully into the clouds. There was no risk of being harassed or ripped from this moment of peace by something sudden, random and violent. Ancient wisteria twisted up around the local church and ended in scented pale purple drops. Not like the wisteria at the park by her house, where bands of feral children annually delighted in shredding the delicate floral cascades.

It had been a dank brown —the colour of a vole, on her first visit. Then the brittle crumbling brown of an over wintered autumn leaf and now something tilting towards an almost chestnut. Surely at his age, it was a toupee. But why, *why on earth*, she wondered, was he wearing one of a slightly different shade each time?

That evening, Matthew came in with anemic tulips, take-out from the local steakhouse and a middling expensive bottle of red wine. She had always hated red wine; it made her weepy. She knew by his slumped posture and round hopeful eyes that he had something he wanted to discuss in earnest.

“I don’t really know how to say this...”, he began as he arranged the flowers in a vase, “...but the guy from three floors up...he ah...he threw himself off the tower today.” Miriam turned to Matthew, alarmed by the tiny brutal film that now played slowly in her mind. She psychically shook off these images and pivoted to wondering what it had to do with flowers, steak, red wine and most of all her.

“It got me thinking what could have been so bad that he did that you know? Apparently, he was the CEO of NeedCorp. I mean what could possibly have been weighing upon him like that? And then I thought you

know it's probably family stuff or a girlfriend or wife. Probably just something as simple as an inability to communicate leading to a fight that led to resentment or a falling-out-of love and now...that's all-over, done, no second chances, no sequels..." Miriam saw with horror where this was headed and resolved to save them both discomfort and time. "I'm not divorcing you Matthew." He was arranging the steaks, fingerling potatoes and grilled asparagus onto bone-coloured plates. A wedding gift that had always perplexed her, *Why are they 'bone' and not simply 'cream'*, she had wondered. One of many things that Matthew didn't consider.

"Life's too short Miriam, for miscommunications, for falling-out-of love, for divorces. Was I really such a terrible husband?" Miriam stood up from the table dragging the chair across the floor as she did so, "Precisely. Life's too short."

Matthew stopped arranging the plates and grabbed the edge of the countertop with both hands as if to steady himself. A tear dropped onto the plate that he was going to give her, the one with the juicier looking of the two steaks. It landed in the dollop of béarnaise sauce splitting the delicate bond of fat and water.

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In 1972, when Dr. Schwank-Meyer met Soren, it was not to interview him for his seminal work, *The Way Across and Around*, as he would later claim. But Soren had indeed made him aware of a method for altering—or rather 'curating'—consciousness. Save for the shepherds of Soren's remote fjord village, Dr. Schwank-Meyer had been the first to learn it.

Twenty years prior to this discovery, he had indeed been born to a sixteen-year-old girl. There in the parking lot of the MaxSave in

Boonkrantz, New Jersey, she really had been exhausted, poorly fed and terrified but she did not die. Crying softly in the flatbed of her manager's pick-up, she had christened him 'Toby'. His adoptive parents Grover and Mrytle Schwank named him Joseph Emile after their respective fathers. In college, he dropped the Joseph. One day Looking up Ellis Island records he came across a Juergen Schwank-Meyer, liked the studious ring of it and tacked it on to Emile. In this way you could say that he had performed his first realignment.

Stronger than even the power of suggestion; the filling of a person with myriad agendas, beliefs, opinions and desires, was its direct opposite. The emptying of a person, was, in non-medical terms, simply a matter of curated starvation and sleep deprivation. The mind having been stripped thusly of the many dressings of civility, was faced now with its most basic components. It was then that these basic components or what we call consciousness, would begin to realign itself. This was where the curation came in. If you provided the correct environment (he had discovered that colour, by millimetres, by degrees and knowing when and how to shift this, was key) and a gentle guiding hand, then the mind would provide the suggestions. A cure that was entirely unique to each patient.

And it was perfectly safe. Unless, of course, they did something to abruptly stop halfway through, as Alex had done. This was why they were given a waiver to sign on the back of their health questionnaire on their first visit. It was in size 8 font and unnecessarily bolded so that on the ancient Xerox, the letters seemed to melt into one impossibly long, illegible word. People would fill out the health questionnaire and hand it back to the receptionist, who would immediately flip it over. The signature line would

always be blank and they would always smile in apology, accept the plastic pen she extended and sign without reading it.

Dr. Schwank-Meyer took off his toupee revealing a full head of lush grey hair. Placing it carefully in the box labelled, 'Dried Tobacco beige, brown,' he allowed his mind to wander, then rest upon Alex. Yes, it was tragic, undeniably so. With the missing sessions, Alex's mind had misinterpreted the metaphor of shedding skins. He had stripped himself, peeled himself down to be —as he thought—reborn anew on the other side of the roof, the long passage through nothing and the abrupt meeting with the sidewalk. But at least now, he was free of the sex addiction he had convinced himself was merely a strong admiration for bonobos.

Noticing that the toupee boxes on the top shelf of his closet were askew, he thought now of Miriam. Miriam who had come to him in shock. Miriam who was probably in her kitchen right that moment having a conversation with a ghost.

Lightning had come through the shower head some 6 months ago, striking but not killing her husband, Matthew. No, he had made it to the kitchen but not as far as his phone, which sat just out of reach next to a bottle of middling red wine and a menu for Marlowe's Chop House. It was there on the floor, in front of the still wrapped tulips, that she found him.